TOWARD A LOCAL ZIONIST THEOLOGY?

The role of the outsider theologian

Piet Naudé
University of Port Elizabeth

Abstract

This paper outlines the methodology of constructing a local African theology of enculturalisation from the perspective of an outsider theologian.

In the first section the concept of a 'local theology' (Schreiter) is explained. The second section explores the question of cultural analysis (Geertz) as starting point for African theology.

The main part of the paper outlines the different 'functions' assigned to an outsider theologian. These are developed as follows: listen and discern; order and translate; relate and evaluate. The paper includes a provisional credal formulation from a Zionist perspective which serves as basis for a local African theology.

Quite a number of important studies have over the years appeared on the theological and socio-political significance of the hymnal traditions in African independent churches (see e.g. Kruger 1971; Oosthuizen 1976; Vilakazi 1976; Cargie 1988; Blacking 1981; Lukhaimane 1981). The study of oral traditions is well established in the so-called Anglo-American school of literature-studies where the basic work by Milman Parry and Albert Lord and subsequent work on orality by Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, Ruth Finnegan and Jack Goody led to an upsurge in studies on the oral genre as such. In history, especially African history, oral traditions have earned a respected place (see the standard work by Vansina, 1985) and such an approach has become part and parcel of historical-critical investigations in biblical studies (e.g. tradition and form criticism).

During 1989 I did extensive field work in the St. Engenas Zion Christian Church (ZCC) of Itsani, a small peasant village about 15 km from Sibasa in Venda (Northern Transvaal). The oral material collected were 52 freely sung hymns which were transcribed, translated and interpreted. The aim was to construct what could be the outline of a local Zionist theology. (The results

were submitted to the HSRC under whose auspices the project was executed, see Naudé 1992. A full, revised version of the work will be published by Edwin Mellen Press during 1993.)

Based on this work, the purpose of this paper is to reflect on the role of the foreign or outsider theologian in the construction of a local theology. Although references to matters of 'content' are made (see credal formulation below), the primary concern is one of method: what is the 'methodological position' of an outsider in his/her endeavour to grasp a 'foreign' theological tradition expressed in oral format?

I shall concisely explain the concept of local theology (1); make a note on the importance of cultural analysis (2), and then proceed to elaborate on the various 'functions' of the outsider theologian (3).

I hope that this will shed some methodological light on the important task of South African theologians to record the oral theology (people's theology?) of which millions of believers are the subject, but which is poorly represented in academic theology.

1. The concept of local theology

The realisation of the 'locality' of theology opposes the traditional perception that Western theology is 'theology' with an implied universalist strain, whereas other theologies are 'adjective-theologies', e.g. liberation theology, African theology, Asian theology, and so forth. It seems more appropriate to speak of theologies in the plural - especially where the enculturalisation of the gospel is discussed.

The concept of 'local theology' to describe the product of the dynamic interplay between gospel, church tradition and culture, is excellently explained by the Catholic scholar, Robert Schreiter, in his *Constructing local theologies* (1985). (See an early discussion of the so-called Chicago effort in Joseph Spae, 1979). I accept his reasons for adopting the term, especially with its connotation of *ecclesia particularis* which reflects the contribution of the local church in developing a culturally relevant theological response to the gospel (Schreiter 1985:5-6).

The task of constructing a fully developed local theology is a very broad and complex task to execute. In the case under discussion, the 'source of information', namely free sung hymns, is perhaps too narrow a basis from which to proceed. But in a sapiential context where theology is more wisdom (*sapientia*) than sure knowledge (*scientia*) (see Schreiter 1985:85-87); and with the example of liberation and African theologies in recent years (see Schreiter 1992), the way to a genuine local theology is not *via* the highway of impressive system-building. It is the following of a number of small footpaths - perhaps unimpressive from a traditional systematic theological perspective - that leads to the creation of a theology which corresponds to the experience of

the community in which it arises (see Penoukou's Christological construction aptly described as Christology in the village).

From this perspective, the results of any study by an outsider may be an important 'footpath', expressing the religious experiences of the relevant community in theological terms, albeit partially and inadequately. I say partially, because there are other sources like sermons, prayers and prophecies which must be consulted to draw a fuller picture of a local theology in action. And I say inadequately, because an extensive cultural analysis is needed to interpret hymns (or any other source material) within their historico-religious framework.

2. Analysis of culture as starting point?

The importance of such an analysis is stated very clearly by Schreiter:

> Ideally, for a genuinely contextual theology, the theological process should begin with the opening of the culture, that long and careful listening to a culture to discover its principal values, needs, interests, directions and symbols (1985:28).

He says this on the basis of the American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz's semiotic approach, where both culture and religion (as part of culture) are defined in terms of symbols that constitute webs of significance which are to be interpretatively analysed (see Geertz 1975:5; see also his reliance on Gilbert Ryle's notion of a 'thick description' of culture, and the definitions on pages 89-90ff).

According to Schreiter, a local theology is developed from culture texts which need not be overtly religious. Once the sign-system of a culture is understood, a selection of culture texts are made 'that will become the focus of theological reflection' so that the religious domain may be brought into relation to the other semiotic domains. Once this is established, the dialogue with the broader church tradition commences (1985:73-74).

Within the limitations of this project, no elaborate, outonomous culture-analysis was attempted. Certain broader cultural considerations were, however, introduced to explain expressions and references which occurred in the hymns. Being an 'outsider' one has to suppose that many of the broader underlying cultural symbols were just not 'seen', and were thus omitted. A fuller interpretation would possibly arise in conjunction with members of the community and a well-trained anthropologist.

In the interplay between culture, gospel and tradition (Schreiter), I took the second, namely the interpretation of the gospel (verbalised in freely sung hymns), as point of departure. Despite the strong point made by Schreiter (culture texts as *starting* point), I believe this to be a fruitful theological avenue due to two factors:

First, there is nothing in Geertz's definition of culture and religion respectively that precludes an 'entrance' to the former *via* the latter. He understand culture to be

> ... an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols ... by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life (1975:89).

And what is the function of religious symbols? Precisely to synthesize a people's ethos and world-view thus formulating

> ... a basis congruence between a particular style of life and a specific metaphysic (1975:90).

If the most comprehensive idea of order is being expressed in religious symbols, and if there is a reciprocal sustaining relation between lifestyle and metaphysics, the identification of a set of religious symbols may open the door to understand the lifestyle/ethos of a cultural group.

Second, if this is accepted, the 'doorway' to these religious symbols is *inter alia via* the poets, prophets and composers in a community. They express the (religious) experiences of the community through the creation of (religious) symbols in a variation of genres (see Wainwright's systematic theology based on doxology, 1980). Von Allem describes this process in terms of the New Testament in his illuminating article, *The birth of theology* (1975). I quote his general conclusion:

> The theologian has no right to fear the spontaneous manner in which the church sometimes expresses the faith. If the apostles had been timorous and shut the mouths of the poets through fear of heresy, the Church would never have found footing on Hellenistic soil. Thus the way things happened in the primitive church teaches us that in the Church the life of faith is the primary thing. Missionaries do not preach a theology but rather the Gospel. Nor is the response of faith yet theology, but rather worship or hymns proclaiming the mighty deeds of God in Jesus Christ (44).

Due to the interrelation between religious and other cultural symbols, the latter are important, even essential, but, (contrary to Schreiter's notion [1]) need not necessarily serve as starting point for a local theology.

These few paragraphs inevitably lead to the question of how the 'outsider' professional theologian would proceed to contribute to the construction of a

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1. In all fairness, it must be stated that Schreiter is not dogmatic about this. Throughout his book, and drawing on wide experience, he constantly urges an openness to allow for a variation of approaches - even the one adopted here! (see 1985:84). See also his exposition of semiotic domains as the assemblage of culture texts (1985:69-70). In terms of his own exposition, I would for instance defend that the dominant semiotic domain in rural Venda, communities like Itsani, is the religious one. And the root metaphors in this domain provide the major linkage between the sign system of the culture as a whole.

local theology. This will explain my own function *vis-à-vis* the Itsani-congregation and will bring us to the point where the first (systematic) theological results emerge.

3. The role of the outsider-theologian

In anthropology and other social sciences the differentiation between an etic or emic perspective is well established. This has direct bearing on the image and relative distance between the researcher and participant (see Mouton & Marais 1988:81ff; Geertz's reference to Kohut's differentiation between experience-near and experience-distant, and important studies on field work like Burgess 1984, Lofland 1971, Denzin 1978, Becker & Geer 1982).

As long as one is aware of one's position as outsider with the concomitant 'etic' perspective, there is, from a researcher's point of view, no fundamental exclusion of important insights and even positive contributions to an understanding of the matter of discussion.

Schreiter points out that the 'explanations' of an emic perspective tend to remain within the system;

> ... hence, if the questioner does not already understand the system, the explanations are not of much help - they are not really translations into another mold, but variations within the same range of discourse (Schreiter 1985:57).

Outer descriptions (etic), on the other hand, often have the advantage of being phenomenological with a very specific concern for explanation. And the latter is executed on the basis of

> ... translating the reality to another mode of discourse or into another sign system (1985:58).

Far from being an imperialist intrusion, an etic perspective may contribute to the self-understanding of the 'insiders', and, if 'translated' well, provides the essential basis for intercommunication and cohesion.

Knowing well that one can never fully understand the symbols of a foreign culture - including the religious symbols - the 'outsider theologian' still has a number of important functions which are - in my view - indispensable for the construction of a local theology. Despite the fact that the development of such a local theology requires a rootedness in the community not attainable by the outsider; and although the community itself is (in this case) the key source for the expression of 'theology', the outsider

> ... can sometimes hear things going on in the community not heard by a native member of the community (Schreiter 1985:19).

Both the insider and the outsider are needed to engage themselves in this very complex process.

The different stages of the outsider theologian's role may now be summarised and described. In practice such a neat distinction is not always possible, but the exposition will at least clarify the process of the development of a local theology as viewed by the outsider.

3.1 The task to listen and discern

Listening to the poet-theologians entails far more than the physical act of making sound- or video recordings. It includes a 'being-present' in the community so that a sound relationship of trust is built. It entails the development of perceptive skills not naturally developed in the course of (systematic) theological training: to 'see' what is 'veiled' to a superficial observance. It requires an openness to experiential expressions and (as observed by Schreiter) perseverance in the long and careful listening to a culture. To listen is in a certain sense an art at which not many Western (and liberation!) theologians, including myself, excel.

To play a constructive role in the development of a local theology, the outsider is compelled to listen with discernment. And in this context, it implies the very definite hermeneutical framework. The process to distil theological insights from transcribed hymns in fact starts with the transcription and translation. The categories created by myself into which the different hymns were 'classified' (e.g. Christology, ecclesiology, Engenas, biblical figures, prayer, etc.) was an important step: this interpretative 'grid' - not inherent to the hymns or their performance as such - may be viewed as a 'contamination' of the original and even as undesirable. But this serves the important function of discerning recurrent themes of oral-formulaic nature in which certain symbols play a central role (see Ong 1982:31-77).

This not only led to the discernment of traditional Christian symbols like father, saviour, the cross, the shepherd or the Spirit, but a number of exciting new ones. It cannot be denied that Engenas, Thabakgona, Moria-Zion and *nanga* are powerful new symbols abstracted from a very specific cultural and religious experience. Once the themes and symbols have been brought to the surface, the second phase of the theologian's task comes to the fore.

3.2 The task to order and translate

The next few paragraphs will make evident why it is very difficult to separate the two aspects of ordering and translation. As I rely to a certain degree on Geertz and Schreiter, a few remarks are needed to clarify the nature of the theologian's task in this regard.

Geertz advocates the use of the term 'interpretative anthropology' to explore the implications of a semiotic approach to human culture (see Umiker-Sebeok [1977] for an informative overview of related approaches in the semiotics of culture). He relies (per definition) on the concept of 'symbol' to set out his own interpretation of culture, including the religious dimension thereof. (In

line with this I usually employ 'symbol' rather than what is generally known as metaphors in theology. I am aware that 'symbol' has a somewhat negative technical connotation in metaphorical theology as set out by for instance Sallie McFague. No further definition of metaphor, model, paradigm and related terms are attempted here.)

And what is a symbol? It is a tangible formulation of a notion, an abstraction from experience fixed in perceptible form, a concrete embodiment of an idea or belief. Symbol is used, says Geertz,

> ... for any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a ve-
> hicle for a conception (and) the conception is the symbol's 'meaning'
> (Geertz 1975:91).

According to him, the essence of human thought lies in the perception of the structural congruence between one set of processes and another set for which it acts as a program, so that the program can be taken as a symbol of the pro-grammed (1975:94). Religion is thus a system of symbols whose 'meaning' is, *inter alia*, derived from their interrelation within a web of significance. And to endeavour an interpretation, is to involve oneself in sorting out the structures of significance.

The implication for this project is clear: the mere isolation of symbols (listen and discern) is not enough. They need to be 'ordered' so as to create a spe-cific interrelation which makes a higher level of interpretation possible. My view is that such an 'ordering' occurs precisely in the act of translation as ex-plained below.

Translation is used on two senses: the first is the ordinary act of expressing ideas set out in one language in another language. The transcription and translation of hymns with interpretative footnotes in the original project were the first steps in this process of uncovering the significance of related sym-bols. Mere observation (implied interpretation) became overt interpretation.

But in a semiotic context, translation entails more than a mere transition of one language to another. It may include the creation of an alternative, but comparative sign system or mode of discourse precisely with the aim to en-hance the interpretative possibilities of the original symbols.

An allusion to music theory will perhaps illuminate this point: one set of notes are often rewritten, i.e. transposed, in a different key. It is also possible to rewrite a musical piece (combination of notes) originally intended for one instrument to be suitable for (interplay by) another instrument - often with exhilarating effect! The latter is perhaps an allusion to what I attempt on a theological level.

Within the context of this project, a systematic theological interest was dis-played throughout the presentation. The first step to translate the hymns into a different mode of discourse was executed by the creation of (mostly) tradi-tional systematic theological categories like Christology, pneumatology and ecclesiology. Like any intercultural interpretation, a 'foreign' schematic re-

presentation is not only inevitable, but necessary to make a new 'reading' possible.

These systematic categories contributed to the identification as well as an understanding of the relation among different symbols (e.g. the relation between father and Engenas; shepherd and saviour; Zion and Thabakgona, and so on). But there is a further stage of ordering which makes a further re-presentation of the symbols possible. This re-presentation is an attempt to answer a simple question: in what 'format' has the church through the ages 'ordered' her religious symbols?

The answer is abundantly clear: in the 'symbols' which embodied the church's credal formulations and to which a definite dogmatic-juridical status of orthodoxy were later assigned. These credal formulations, often hymnal in character, of the New Testament (discerned in passages like Phlp 2; Col 1; Rm 10 and 1 Cor 15) received in process of time different stereotyped formats. And as the church found a definite formulation necessary for the sake of unity, the resultant text is known as a 'symbol', e.g. the *Symbolum Romanum* or the Apostolic symbol.

The important question that now arises, is which of the many 'symbols' (here used in the sense of a collective formulation of accepted and well-known individual symbols) would be suitable to serve as alternative mode of discourse? Which 'symbol' would have an universal intercommunicative value as well as (on a secondary level) a normative function?

I believe that the apostolic symbol (*Apostolicum*, or twelve articles of faith) is an excellent choice in this regard. It may be motivated from different angles.

First, apart from its universal acceptance, it has, historically speaking, roots in the Western, Eastern and African churches (e.g. Carthago and Hippo). It thus avoids the criticism of (Western) theological imperialism or (Western) rationalistic expression. Second, its pre-history through the *Symbolum Romanum* until the final formulation (starting from the second and ending between the fourth and seventh century AD) is a clear example of credal-*formation* (see Doekes 1975:12ff), very applicable to the situation of the ZCC. Third, the *Apostolicum* may assist us greatly in the difficult task of introducing a critical element, namely a criterion or criteria for what may be called 'Christian identity'. This relates to the critical function of the theologian as discussed below.

The next step in the process of translation is now clear: the representation of the Zionist hymnal symbols in a credal formulation on the basis of the *Apostolicum*. Based on the content and interpretation of the transcribed hymns, as well as the categories created, the following credal formulation may serve as re-presentation and (for purposes of interpretation) final 'translation' of the religious symbols into an alternative mode of discourse.

There is obviously no intention to present the formulation below as a serious suggestion for the ZCC to accept. If one understands how this church

functions and how the liturgy is organised, such an idea is out of place. The history of credal-formation in the church in any case denies the suggestion of a 'finished product' being 'presented' to a church for acceptance or refusal. It is nothing more than a re-presentation to bring a new interrelation of new and old symbols into existence and to make a certain kind of intercommunication possible.

A constructed *Apostolicum* from the Itsani St. Engenas Zion Christian Church could perhaps read as follows:

> We believe in the God of Engenas, Jehovah;
> who instructs us to pray;
> and who as the holy Father stops the fighting of this world.
>
> We believe in the Lord Jesus, our Saviour, the Son of God;
> who died on the cross;
> who is the shepherd;
> who as *nanga* of the spirit controls our lives;
> who is the Messiah on his way;
> and who will return at the sound of the horn.
>
> We believe in the Holy Spirit who blesses us;
> who as Good Spirit fills our hearts.
>
> We believe in the pardoning of offences through the blood of the lamb.
>
> We believe in Engenas as father of the nation, the chief of all chiefs;
> who gives us rain and who heals;
> we accept Moxwadube who dances luimbo,
> who preaches the gospel,
> and about whom everyone speaks.
>
> We believe in the truth that Moria, the holy mountain of Engenas is for all;
> we believe that in Zion, whence we are called by prayer,
> everybody will be pardoned and healed.
>
> We believe in the unity of the church, based on peace and love which come from the Lord Jesus;
> and we believe that the Father makes the emblem of Moria shine.
>
> We believe in heaven, eternal life before God,
> where we shall praise the name of Jesus.
>
> Amen.

It is essential to read the translation *cum* interpretations of hymns in the original report to understand the 'roots' and significance of the formulation above. It is the end of a laborious process and must be read as such. I do not include any interpretive remarks here. The only reason for its inclusion is to clarify the role of the outsider theologian in practical terms.

Now that the ordering-translating role of the theologian has been described, the last phase of his/her involvement comes to the fore, namely to relate and evaluate.

3.3 The task to relate and evaluate

As with the other stages described above, the aspects of relation and evaluation are closely connected and no strict ordering should be assumed on the basis of the exposition that follows. In the process of constructing a local theology, many questions ultimately arise.

In this section two kinds of questions are discussed. Firstly, questions relating to the ecumenical context: what contribution, if any, does the Itsani-congregation make to the universal church's understanding of the gospel? Is there a strong enough basis to relate the symbolic expressions of the local community of saints to the catholic church?

Secondly, there are critical (i.e. evaluative, normative) questions: are the symbols and their representation congruent with what may be called the 'Christian identity?'. When is a call of syncretism or dual religious systems justifiable, and how should a local Zionist theology be judged?

Let us commence with the perspective of the inter-relation between the local and the universal church: convinced of the basic nature of theology as an ecumenical enterprise, I consider the responsibility of inter-communicator as one of the gravest for the professional (outsider) theologian.

The theologian who stands in a certain tradition - itself an example of 'local theology'! - and gains a view of an alternative tradition, has, for the sake of truth, to engage the two worlds by *inter alia* commencing genuine dialogue. In this way an interrelation may be created which opens all the exciting possibilities of reciprocal enrichment and expansion of the Christian tradition.

> In so doing, the theologian helps to create the bonds of mutual accountability between the local and world church (Schreiter 1985:18).

How does one establish a bond of mutuality? In the concrete case of this project, it would - at least initially - be premature to immediately compare the Itsani-*Apostolicum* (IA) with the standardised one (A), point out what is being omitted in IA and then wait for their 'reply'. (The latter will in any case not be forthcoming!). It is premature for a number of reasons:

Firstly, such a comparison denies the methodological way (meta + hodos) travelled above: if the starting point is the faith-experience of an oral (mostly illiterate) community based on the work of a specific indigenous religious leader and expressed in their own cultural thought-forms, an end-product identical to A is obviously highly improbable. In fact, the high degree of similarity (although constructed) between A and IA is astonishing and may point to a stronger reliance of the Zionist church on the traditional Christian paradigm than would be expected (see historical notes above).

Secondly, room should be made for the process of credal formation, i.e. the extension/alteration of the present symbolic world. The original forms of A were much shorter than the final product. Its cradle is the New Testament credal formulations. Many reformulations occurred resulting in different complementary 'symbols' in Europe and North Africa. Eventually the *Symbolum Romanum* was formulated, seven additions [2] responding to different questions were accepted until the present *textus receptus* of the *Apostolicum*. The latter functioned in the church since the eighth century, but was only officially accepted by the Roman Catholic church in the twelfth century! (see Doekes 1975:16).

This creates a open-ended perspective with regard to the Apostolicum and allows for the voice of the ZCC to be heard. Due to the dynamic process of theology-in-the-making in the ZCC (changing leadership; high interaction between different regions; creation of new hymns and 'forgetting' old ones; rapidly changing cultural conditions), as well as the expressed universalist strain in some of the hymns, one may accept the continuous extension of the present symbolic representation. And part of this extension may come about through ecumenical dialogue for which there is a growing openness [3].

Perhaps it is too bluntly formulated, but the point of departure is not the one-to-one comparison of IA and A, but the process of credal-formation in the context of the living experience of faith underlying religious symbols.

Let us now turn to the critical-normative perspective: whether IA is, generally speaking, accepted as a remarkable recontextualisation of the Christian truth, a serious form of syncretism or even a dual religious system, will depend on how broad or narrow the evaluative starting point is.

Authors differ considerably on this issue, and understandably so. To mention but a few: Von Allem (1975:50) takes a narrow, but very definite stance in accepting the confession of the Lord Jesus Christ who died and was raised for us as the focal point of faith from which any authentic theology must start

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2. These additions are as follows: (i) *creatorem coeli et terrae* (already present in some Eastern creeds); (ii) in terms *passus* and *mortuus* (part of the cathegesis of the church); (iii) in stead of born from the Holy Spirit, *qui conceptus est de Spiritu sancto*; (iv) *descendit ad infernos* (prevalent in the Syrian church); (v) the further explanation of the church as the *catholicam* and (vi) as *communio sanctorum*; (vii) the important reference to eternal life (*vitam aeternam*). See Doekes 1975: 17-19.

3. I was quite amazed when approached by a prominent and well-educated member of the St. Engenas ZCC in Venda to give him some examples of Christian credal formulations. I then learnt that he was not even aware of a document like the *Apostolicum*, but that the ZCC wants to enhance its theological standing by adopting a kind of credal formulation. Obviously, a mere acceptance of A would be very superficial and will amount to mere tokenism, neglecting the rich symbols already present in the ZCC. As a document it will in any case have little or no influence on the ordinary church-member: many of them are not even aware of the Church's constitution (and why should they be?).

ever anew. HB Beeby (1973:37) sees the biblical revelation (Old and New Testaments) as norm and foundation of any indigenous theology whereas Eugene Nida takes God's redemptive love in Jesus Christ resulting in redemptive lives as basic criterion to judge whether the Good News has been communicated (quoted by Taber 1978:77).

Others introduce a broader criteriology. Charles Taber (1978:69-76) for example lists seven limitations or criteria for indigenous theology: it must be biblical, affirms the transcendence of God, be Christological and prophetic, it should be dialogical, open-ended and subject to the Holy Spirit. Robert Schreiter offers five criteria that cumulatively give a reasonable guarantee of 'Christian identity': the cohesiveness of Christian performance; the test of theology in the worshiping context; the praxis (fruits) of the Christian community and the Christian performance; the judgement of other churches and (lastly) the challenge of the local theology to other churches (1985:118-120).

One cannot expect to reach agreement on this matter. Schreiter admits that

> ... this remains the most difficult area in developing local theologies, at least from a theoretical perspective. But is also one of the most important (1985:121).

As my concern is not only to point out certain theoretical considerations, this 'most difficult' task must be approached head-on:

With the specific methodology employed in this study, and with the re-presentation of religious symbols from one genre (hymns) to another (credal formulation), I have already moved in a certain direction. Without pretending to present a full 'evaluation', the following three questions may now be explained as a kind of 'model' for assessing the quality of presenting the Christian identity.

The first critical question is whether the symbols and their interrelation as presented here as a result of theological reflection adequately express the underlying religious experience of the community from which they arose in the first place?

Here the position of the outsider theologian is very tenuous. For the theologian 'adequate expression' is normally used as an analytical criterion: have I taken account of all the recurring symbols? Have I been consistent in my semiotic translation? and so on. There are obviously some empirical data which may point in a certain direction: the growth in membership and the liveliness of worship might confirm that the isolated symbols (in varying degrees of importance) are indeed an adequate expression of the underlying religious experience.

But this criterion has perhaps to be applied far more intuitively and existentially - and this can only be done by the members of the local community themselves, and be tested by theologically trained people from the community.

The second critical question is whether there is a congruence between the symbols inherent to a local theology on the one hand, and the symbols which have become an accepted part of the broader Christian tradition (itself an accumulation of a series of local theologies!) on the other? This is what Schreiter refers to as cohesion; i.e.

> ... if the theological formulations find itself clearly at odds with the rest of Christian doctrine or requires a radical shifting of large parts of it, there is a very good chance that it is not well-formed Christian performance [4] (1985:118; see Taber's notion of a dialogical theology).

Here the outsider theologian plays an essential role. In this specific case I have (for reasons set out above) chosen the *Apostolicum* as the 'grammar' of Christian tradition in terms of which the (constructed) 'performance' of the Itsani-congregation may be evaluated. With the comments above in mind, a few remarks are made which point the way for a full evaluation not attempted here:

For any meaningful and creative enculturalization of the gospel to occur, one should not expect an exact duplication of all the traditional religious symbols and metaphors. As already stated: a one-to-one comparison with a resultant list of omissions or additions proves very little. New symbols and metaphors are welcomed - they enrich our understanding of the gospel and allow the local church to contribute to the universal church.

Let me use the notions of God as the God of Engenas and Jesus as *nanga* as illustrations of the second critical question: to describe Him/Her as the *God of Engenas* is obviously a novel expression of God's identity. A fundamentalistic approach would render this as unacceptable. But the question is whether the meaning of this symbol (which can be determined hermeneutically) contradicts the notion of God when described in term of (fore)fathers like Moses, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In the light of the interpretation of the hymns above, the answer to the question of a contradictory depiction of God, is negative: for the ZCC-members, Engenas is the founder of their faith, and in terms of the clan-idea prevalent in their thinking, it is a natural identification of the God they came to know.

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4. The background of this statement lies in Schreiter's reworking of Noam Chompsky's theory of language acquisition (Schreiter 1985: 114ff). Highly simplified, Chompsky's theory of transformational grammar proves that language competence and the concomitant language performance in a certain sense 'preceded' the grammar which was traditionally seen as creating language. Applied to theology, faith relates to language competence; theology to language performance, and orthodoxy (e.g. creeds) to grammar. Just as the multiplication of language performances on the basis of language competence eventually leads to the development of a grammar to have a normative function, faith and theologies may be (and are in fact) developed 'independently' of orthodoxy. But they must eventually allow the latter to serve as a normative boundary: just as not every sentence is correct, so not every theology is 'equally well performed'.

The other references to God clearly identify the God of Engenas *inter alia* as the Jehovah of the Old Testament, the One who sent His Son, and as the One in Whose presence eternal life is lived.

Cumulatively it becomes clear: this is the same God known and confessed by the universal church, although presented in a culturally creative way.

Another new symbol is the title of *nanga* assigned to Jesus. Superficially one might be drawn to the conclusion that this is a denial of Christ as He is humiliated by being placed in the context of sorcery or witchcraft; or it may be seen as a syncretistic portrayal of Jesus due to the fact that elements of traditional religion determine the content and meaning of the symbol. A number of suggestions are necessary to come to some sort of 'evaluative judgement' on this issue.

First, a brief remark about the history of Christological titles makes abundantly clear that the mere 'influence of culture' is not a pivotal factor in a conception of syncretism. In a very old article, CFD Moule points to the influence of circumstances in the early church to give reasons

> ... for the appearance and disappearance, for the advance and retreat, of one title and another (Moule 1959).

One tends to forget that the present, accepted symbols to portray Christ (Jesus, Son of Man/God; Lord; Divine Logos; Christ itself) are all drawn from the prevalent cultural settings in which they were formulated. They have become so 'universal' that their particularity is forgotten: new symbols only appear to be more culturally conditioned in the light of this 'forgotten history'.

Second, is the point not that syncretism (negatively understood) arises when a foreign culture determine the context and meaning of the traditional Christian symbol? To answer this, let us take the well-known Johannine Logos as an example:

John clearly relies on two cultural traditions in his depiction of Christ as the Logos. First, the Logos-concept is steeped in Hellenistic thought. It carries the association of the rational principle in the ordering of the universe from Heraclitus through the Stoics to Philo's interpretation of logos as mediation between God and the universe. In the Jewish tradition, logos is related to the *dabar* (word) of Jahwe and as the fashioner of all things within the context of the wisdom literature.

Is John not dangerously close to 'syncretism' in his employment of the logos-concept? How would a Greek or Jewish reader respectively understand his prologue? Is the understanding of Christ not (negatively) determined by foreign cultures?

The answer is yes and no: yes, because there is no other way to explain the gospel than to use existing cultural concepts. And this always implies a certain 'determination' of meaning. But, there is also an transcendence of these

cultural concepts which explains the uniqueness of the gospel. In John's case, one could refer to the radical reference in the prologue of a logos who became flesh. This places the interpretation of the logos on a totally different level unparallelled in (but still related to) Hellenistic and Jewish thought.

This example hopefully illustrates the process involved in the enculturalisation of the gospel. Christianity, as Schreiter points out,

> ... has a long history of absorbing elements from the cultures in which it has lived: but this is precisely how it developed its incarnate character (Schreiter 1985:151).

Returning to the question of Jesus as *nanga*, two remarks are now relevant: it is, obviously a concept derived from the Venda cultures with overtones of *vuloi* (witchcraft) and the manipulation of the forces in the cosmos (see Van Rooy 1978:24ff). In this sense it does 'determine' the meaning of Jesus. But in a semiotic approach, the relationship among symbols is of paramount importance in 'determining' meaning. If *nanga* is read in relation to *Morena* (Lord), *mulauli* (controller), *Yesu* (Jesus) and *murwa Mudzimu* (son of God), the distinctiveness of the gospel is confirmed (there is no other *nanga* like this!). But - and this is very important - the meaning of the gospel is also enhanced (Jesus is a *nanga* of the spirit!).

In the view of this, it becomes clear that a fruitful discussion of syncretism has to bear two considerations in mind: on the one hand, the struggle of the local church to understand the gospel in its own cultural context is just as important as the dogmatic certainties of the universal church. On the other hand, what is termed 'syncretism' may, from a semiotic analysis of culture, only be a stage in the long process of one culture's way of coming to grips with an advancing culture, resulting in the emergence of a conjunctive sign-system (see Schreiter 1985:144ff).

I hope these examples illustrate the manner in which the second question of the relation between the local and 'universal' church may be addressed. This is obviously an ongoing process which should involve both insiders and ousiders.

The third (and last) critical question that remains to be asked with regard to the local theology as well as the Christian tradition, centres on the paradigmatic and normative role of the Scriptures where the root-metaphors and symbols of the Christian tradition are expressed. If a better understanding of these symbols in new contexts requires the tradition to be refined - even on the level of credal formulations - the process of reformulation on the basis of consensus (agreement in the discerning of the Spirit) should be set in motion.

It is important to remind ourselves of the fact that we are dealing here with the oral expression of faith from a largely illiterate community. This has, in relation to the last question, the following implications:

A second-order reflection on Scripture as Scripture should not be expected. The 'theological material' which reflects the psychodynamics of an oral noetic

position, makes such analytic categories highly improbable (see Ong 1982:31-77).

A first-order expression of Scriptural passages will not take the form of exact quotations. This is the case because the majority of singers do not have access to a textual Scripture for an exact memorization to take place. Even more important is the realization that oral performances are creative activities resulting in different representations of 'texts' in every performance (there is no original!). This was evident in the comparison of the same hymns that were never performed in exactly the same manner (see original report) despite the strong conserving influence of music as mnemic device.

One should perhaps in this regard ask what the empirical relation was between the *Sola Scriptura* of the Reformation and the rise of 'literacy' due to the translation of the bible into various indigenous languages. In the case under discussion, one could only speak of the implicit role of Scripture in shaping the freely sung hymns.

The broader church community has, however, over the ages been convinced that the *Apostolicum* is in congruence with the Scriptures. The church accepts that this is an adequate expression of the root-symbols in terms of different religious experiences. In this context the omission of reference to God's creative work or the resurrection of the body (to name but two aspects), are important, for they form an essential part of the biblical witness to God and the Christian faith.

The challenge for the ZCC in general and the Itsani-congregation in particular, is to allow their experiences to be increasingly shaped by the Scriptures (itself largely an orally based document). This will allow the constant renewal of their symbols in the amazing way verbalised in their hymns, and (ultimately) in their theology.

In the mean time the broader church should not close herself off as if the 'final truth' has been attained once and for all. It is the work of the Spirit to lead the church in the truth. The basis for theological intercommunication in South Africa lies, *inter alia*, in the third Person of the Trinity. He opens the eyes of insiders and outsiders to understand 'alien' spiritual experiences as experiences of the Spirit.

A humble listening to the theological voice of the ZCC-hymns will add important notes to the symphony of the universal church's doxology before God.

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