

TOWARDS A SOLUTION

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Abstract

A dual root problem for the promotion of Biblical Studies in a democratic, multi-faith South Africa is identified: the (often well-intended?) distortion of the original Christian tradition and authority into a pressurising combination of 'Christian' traditionalism and authoritarianism. It is important to deal with this problem, but also to relate to the people concerned. A pair of problem-solving direction indicators towards the solution of this problem is suggested: reinterpreting and relevantising.

As a book that originated in real life-situations and addresses the real life-situations of its readers, the Bible has to be constantly reinterpreted. A scholarly, imaginative, contextual study of the Bible (and of Christian theology and Biblical Studies) is no threat to the original Good News of Christianity. It may precisely highlight the uncomplicated, powerful Christian message.

Such a reinterpretation obviously goes hand in hand with the revitalising of the original life-relatedness of the Christian message and the relevantising of the Bible in our teaching - by focusing on relevant topics, questions and problems, on input from students, and by taking into account various religious options, philosophical and ideological views, popular conceptions, and the findings of the natural and human sciences.

So, if Christianity and Christian Studies are to be experienced as really relevant in the new South Africa, the solution to be planned will have to restore the emphasis on life-transformation, that was jeopardised by traditionalism and authoritarianism.

1. The problem and the people concerned

1.1 Identifying the root problem to be solved

In this concluding session of our congress you and I are challenged by a modestly stated ('towards') and clearly goal-directed ('a solution') but open-

ended (no specific problem[s] mentioned) topic. In previous sessions we have discussed problems related to present-day interpretation of the Bible and present-day versions of Christian theology. Between the lines of our well planned congress programme we can surely sense the concern about the survival and the thriving of Biblical (and Religious) Studies. After all, our Society aims at promoting research, standards of syllabuses, training and teaching, academic relationships and publicising 'the value of Biblical Studies',¹ and we even had 'promotion of Biblical Studies' in our initial name.² And now, moving as we are towards the new, democratic, multi-cultural and multi-faith South Africa, we may indeed be concerned about the future of Biblical (and Religious) Studies. (I am adding 'and Religious' in brackets because at our 1991 congress members from some colleges and universities reported from their recent experience that Biblical Studies could only be retained in a changed format - as Religious Studies in which relevant issues are studied in a dialogic way.) We realise that after three decades of hot-house protection Biblical Studies will now have to get accustomed to a multi-faith atmosphere, and that South African Christianity, after three centuries, faces the same challenge.

But it is not the survival of our subject that is the problem. To retain and to relevantise Biblical (and Religious) Studies are precisely our objectives. In order to identify our problems, we therefore have to look at obstacles in the way to these objectives. And according to the advice of experts in problem-solving we should not only focus our attention on obvious hindrances, but especially on their underlying, perhaps hidden, root causes.

When writing this paper a month ago I wished I knew which root problems and possible solutions would be mentioned by speakers and delegates at the congress. And now I am looking forward to the frank and meaningful contributions of respondents and participants in the discussion.

My experience, reading and reflection led me to the diagnosis of a dual problem in the way of Christianity at large and Biblical (and Religious) Studies in particular: traditionalism and authoritarianism.

While I am disturbing you with long words, let me add a light shock which I experienced when writing this paper. In addressing a seminar on Religion Education in Australia,³ Prof Basil Moore made the valid point that as we talk of History Education and not Historical Education, we should also talk of Religion Education instead of Religious Education. Since he convinced me, and since we are already doing this in the Afrikaans name, Bybel- en Gods-

1. Constitution of the Southern African Society for Biblical Studies, 1983. Cf also W Vosloo, Word of Introduction, *Scriptura* 26 (July 1988), three unnumbered pages.

2. From 1982 to 1985.

3. A seminar arranged by the Institute of Comparative Religion in Southern Africa, based at the University of Cape Town. The speaker, Prof Basil Moore, is Professor of Curriculum Studies in the Department of Religion at the University of South Australia.

dienskunde, I am proposing the English version Bible and Religion Studies and will use it in the rest of this paper when I refer to future planning.

The previous sentence indicates that I have now dropped the bracketing of 'and Religion'. Thereby I am proposing that we take seriously both our Christian convictions and our multi-faith situation. Regarding the word order (Bible and Religion/Religion and Bible) I may add that at the University of the Western Cape we discussed the two possibilities with our students and they preferred the first.

Although this paper at this congress obviously focuses more on a solution for the Bible Studies part of our subject, I will keep referring to the Religion Studies part as well.

1.2 Traditionalism as one part of the problem

A term ending in -ism is generally used for some exaggerated form of a valid issue mentioned in the first part of the term. We therefore have to remember that tradition does play a meaningful role in many areas of our ongoing life. Valuable stories, findings and convictions are handed down (Lat: *traditae sunt*) from generation to generation. That is why we do not have to reinvent the wheel - both the literal wheel and all sorts of metaphorical wheels. In Christianity the Good News initiated by Jesus Christ forms the essential core of a tradition that has been passed on for almost two thousand years.

But traditions, especially those in cultures and religions, may become over emphasised and even idolised. What happened in the early centuries of the Christian era, when a narrative tradition was formalised into an authorised orthodoxy, can be understood. It took place in a world with its legacies of Greek philosophical logic and scientific classification, Roman law and order, and Latin exactness. Christianity was struggling to attain the status of a legitimatised religion and was at the same time striving to give Christians one clear direction in the cosmopolitan, Hellenistic variety of religions and philosophies. We have to be honest, however, about the hierarchical and polemical elements, foreign to the spirit of Christianity, that crept into this process. We have to assess, without pious prejudice, to what extent the process of doctrinal fixation lead to orthodoxy in the sense of 'sound doctrine', and to what extent the outcome may have to be labelled 'pleistodoxy'⁴ in the sense of 'majority opinion'. Perhaps we have to admit anyway that an originally dynamic Christian tradition was straightjacketed into an ecclesiastically sanctioned traditionalism.⁵

4. What prompted me to put together this word was V K Barrett's reference (Barrett 1974:97) to Bauer, after some penetrating questions of his own: 'The work of Walter Bauer (*Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei in ältesten Christentum*, 1934; English translation 1972) seems to mean that there is no objective criterion of right and wrong, orthodox and heretical; the orthodox is the side that won, the heretical that which lost - it was as simple as that.'

5. Cf the 'patent' contrast Hatch (1957:1) indicates between the ethical Sermon on the Mount and the metaphysical Nicene creed.

As teachers of Biblical Studies we may be tempted to dissociate ourselves from this problem and leave it to the theologians. Yet, as fellow Christians we cannot escape our responsibility in this regard. And perhaps we, having no (or few?) doctrinal strings attached to us, are entrusted with a special responsibility to help shift the focus from an excessive traditionalism to the original, uncomplicated but powerful Christian tradition.⁶

1.3 Authoritarianism as the counterpart of the same problem

Here too we have to distinguish between the valid phenomenon and its distortion - between the genuine, inherent authority of a convincing, meaningful message and the superficial, imposed authoritarianism by which an unprovable, debatable position is propagated. Once again we can understand why early Christians were tempted into the ism. They were living in the era of the discipline and authority oriented Roman Empire. Greek democracy and critical thinking were gaining ground, but authoritarianism did not readily abandon its domineering position in socio-political structures or in the exchange of opinions. We can also understand why this ism did not belong to a passing stage only. It was perpetuated by authoritative ways of church management, preaching and teaching. Typical of the educational methods used was the (to us) stunning advice of the famous John Chrysostom (AD 413):

Like the creators of statues, devote your time to fashioning your child into a magnificent statue for God ... (Davies 1954:123).

Tools used in such a process were the Bible as an oracular object and the catechetical method of memorising precisely formulated statements (as secretly inculcated by the bishops themselves).

1.4 Possible reasons for the persistence of this dual problem

Problems are usually not solved by ignoring or evading them, or by simply hoping that time will let them disappear. In most cases it is useful to analyse a problem in order to identify the real interests, needs and aims of the parties concerned. In the case of the problem we are discussing such an analysis may require extensive research into a complicated history, but it will probably provide significant insights.

It seems as if most of the people responsible for the firm establishment of traditionalism and authoritarianism, throughout the history of Christianity, were motivated by one of the following two views:

1. The conviction that a religion of ancient traditions (about divine revelations, religious leaders and their followers, and ceremonies of worship) and authoritative prescriptions (precisely formulated confessions of faith, and

6. I have elaborated this idea in a conference paper on 'The challenge to originality - as encountered in the methodological approach of Christian Religious Education courses developed in Africa' (Malan 1992).

elaborate, casuistic rules of conduct) is quite sufficient, and that neither a real relationship of faith nor a genuinely changed life-style has to be taken seriously. (The Pharisees may be taken as an example from the New Testament - bearing in mind, however, that some of them could have held the next view.)

2. The conviction that religious traditions should be accepted unquestioningly in good faith, since they are based on divine authority and communicated by divinely authorised individuals. (Here a New Testament example is provided by the majority of the Galatians, who apparently accepted the message of Christian believing and living, but also and especially the well established tradition of Jewish law observance.)

Both these perspectives reveal a definite interest in religion. People having the first conviction probably perceive their need as that of performing enough religious duties to reach the purpose of being regarded as pious, religious people. Those inspired by the second conviction seem to aim at a genuine religious commitment, and apparently understand their need to be that of naively following the guidance provided by *bona fide* proclaimers of God's will.

1.5 The importance of interests, needs and relationships

As soon as we start approaching a problem by exploring, or even just imagining, the motives of the people concerned, a new way towards a solution is opened up. We then become aware of the people behind the problem and we may discover their good intentions. Instead of simply labelling them and attacking their position, we take due note of their needs and aims. Instead of merely trying to win the case, we aim at a solution which will resolve the issue and maintain or restore relationships, an outcome which deserves the optimistic name of a 'win-win solution'.

At the same time this process allows us to share our own convictions with the other party. This may play an extremely important part when the problem is a deeply rooted religious one, and when people have strong convictions like those outlined above. So, instead of belittling and criticising the isms we are talking about, we may rather highlight the surprising gain in meaning, insight and experience one can get from commitment to the real, ism-less Christian tradition and authority.

1.6 Preliminary summary

We have to identify root problems hindering the promotion of Bible and Religion Studies (and of Christianity) as we are moving towards the democratic co-existence of South Africans committed to various faiths.

The root problem identified in this paper is the distortion of the original Christian tradition and genuine Christian authority into a pressurising combination of 'Christian' traditionalism and authoritarianism.

Some of the people responsible for the firm establishment of these isms could have been convinced that a formal, casuistic Christianity is enough; others could have been genuinely but naively committed to a version of Christianity exactly as it was handed down to them.

It is important to deal with the problem and to relate to the people concerned, bearing in mind their needs and intentions, and making them aware of the truly Christian insight and experience that can be gained by all who allow themselves to be delivered from the domination of these isms.

1.7 A positive direction towards a solution

After the experiment of thinking ourselves into a deeply rooted problem and well-intentioned people under its influence, we can now focus our attention on a route along which they and we may really be liberated from the domain of traditionalism and authoritarianism.⁷

Obviously, such a route cannot be a short-cut to the static position of another ism. It can be nothing else than the ongoing route of a lifelong journey. It has to be a process of constantly being delivered, changed, transformed - which is precisely the essential process of being a committed Christian.

My suggestion, which is meant to initiate our discussion, is therefore that a pair of problem-solving direction indicators along this route is reinterpreting and relevantising.

2. Reinterpreting the Bible in our present context

2.1 The inevitability of reinterpretation

On the first pages of a very recommendable book, *A Bible for our time*, Lucas Grollenberg emphasised the two things that usually happen 'whenever a community begins to venerate a particular writing as a holy book': 'The words are seen to be God's own words and the origin of the book is set in the divine world.' And 'from then on, no one is allowed to change anything in it.' But then, because 'like anything in the world, the community in which the holy book is used is subject to change', 'we have a further phenomenon: a way of interpreting the holy scripture develops which changes with the times, and which in each successive period defines the 'spirit' in which the 'letter' must be understood' (Grollenberg 1979:1-2).

Grollenberg made these observations with reference to several religions, and he indicated how it was a breakthrough in the field of secular history that facilitated our new understanding of the books of the Bible (Grollenberg 1979:84-86). But he also highlighted the way in which Jesus himself intro-

7. And related isms such as literalism, biblicism, dogmatism and fundamentalism.

duced 'an entirely new interpretation of the sacred scriptures' (Grollenberg 1979:38).

In the history of Christian hermeneutics, however, the scene was unfortunately dominated for eighteen centuries by the piously appearing option of cherishing the Bible as an ancient, oracular object. And then, when scholars began pioneering the implications of Jesus' example, they were vehemently opposed by the establishment. Today, two centuries later, this opposition has apparently become the opinion of a minority, which sometimes proves to be quite vociferous, however. Against this whole background many if not most students of Bible Studies (and members of Christian churches) may still need tactful but persistent training to acquire 'more awareness of how religious texts live by reinterpretation' (Stendahl 1970:30). They need to understand that, while this may be true of all religious texts, the specific challenge to reinterpret the Bible (Old and New Testament) is not directed at us by historians, linguists or other experts in 'secular' fields. They need to discover how such a challenge comes from the authors of many Old ⁸ and New ⁹ Testament passages and books, and from Jesus himself. ¹⁰ We constantly need to remind our students and ourselves that the books of the Bible came into being in real life, were preserved in real life, and address us in real life, and that real life is never a fixed product, but always a dynamic process.

2.2 New and old meanings

Such a strong emphasis on reinterpretation should lead us towards a solution for a traditionalism problem, but should not lead us towards the extreme of reinterpretationalism. We have to identify and appreciate the elements of tradition that retain their stability for very good reasons. But we also have to realise that there may be dynamic (anti-static) ways of keeping traditions vibrantly alive. To use the example of the wheel again - its original shape is retained, but innumerable improvements in bearings, spokes and tyres have tremendously increased the usefulness of the wheel.

In a similar way the solution we are envisaging should retain the original shape of the Christian message as well as genuinely Christian developments of the past, and be open to any sincerely Christian creative developments of the future. Here again we may take seriously what Jesus said. In the context of discussing with his disciples the understanding of his parables we find a sentence (preserved in just one of the gospels) of far-reaching importance. So much meaning may indeed be derived from this single sentence that I am inclined to say that this whole paper is an elaboration of this saying of Jesus:

8. Cf 2 Sm 24:1,24 and 1 Chr 21:1,24. 'A distinctive feature of the traditions preserved in both Testaments is that they were constantly being reinterpreted' (Smart 1970:153). More examples are given by Smart (1970:153-157).

9. Cf Gl 3:24-25.

10. Cf Mt 5:21-48.

This means, then, that every teacher of the Law who becomes a disciple in the Kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who takes new and old things out of his storeroom (Matt 13:52).

What may surely be discerned in these words are:

the deliverance from traditionalism (a teacher of the Jewish establishment becoming a follower of Jesus on an entirely new way)

the deliverance from authoritarianism (a teacher of the Jewish establishment becoming a learner under God's guidance)

the availability of authentic tradition (old things from a treasury of valuables)

the possibility of creative reinterpretation (new things from the same treasury of valuables)

the responsibility of relevantising (understanding the life-related messages of the parables)

the impact of genuine authority (undocinaire but powerful teaching, questioning and discussion).

And if we now ask the 'how' question, which is part of the 'towards a solution' question, we may find a clear answer and its clear implications in these words of Jesus:

Become a disciple: a learner under God's guidance and a promotor of his cause. ¹¹

Distinguish the new context (the rule of God) from the old (the law of Moses).

Understand and use new and old (mentioned in this order) guidelines in the present context (the obvious context of Jesus' parables).

Let us therefore explore ways in which an understanding of the contexts of the past and involvement in the context of the present can enable us to reinterpret these ever-valuable old meanings and constantly new meanings.

2.3 The revealing role of context exploring

In the study of the Bible we find two types of contextual study. Since early days words and phrases were studied in conjunction with (con-) the text they form part of. At a much later stage pleas were heard for studying passages in conjunction with the life-situations in which they came into being. A striking example of such an encouragement comes from Myles Coverdale, ¹² who,

11. Cf Louw & Nida 1988: 470.

12. 'Myles Coverdale, in his translation in speaking of the Bible, writes: "It shall greatly helpe ye to understand Scripture if thou mark
not only what is spoken or wryten,

early in the sixteenth century undertook the then life-threatening risk ¹³ of translating the Bible from elite Latin into understandable English (Demaray 1964:47-48).

In our present-day Biblical Studies we are focusing a good deal of attention on this second type of contextual study (and to a lesser degree on the first type). We have come to realise that 'understanding involves not only language forms but social structures. The "real situation" is an indispensable component of "meaning"' (Klassen & Snyder 1962:47). But even more and even more penetrating attention could be focused on the whole series of life situations concerned.

2.3.1 The contexts in which the books of the Bible came into being

Almost 40 years ago it could already be said that

... scholars of the Old Testament and the New have placed beyond any doubt that the books of the Bible sprang out of the experience of the religious community, Hebrew-Jewish and Christian ... (Knox 1953:26).

¹⁴

And that

... for this reason it should be studied and can be understood only in the light of the character, interests, experiences, needs, and circumstances of the historical community whose life it reflects (Knox 1953:26).

What was meant by these key words was, however, much more than what is found in many 'standard' works on 'Introduction': discussions about the authorship, date, purpose, readers, characteristics of each particular book. What Knox advocated strengthened the case put in the same year by Cadbury for matching 'the study of expression with a study of mind and experience' (Kee 1980:11), ¹⁵ and such appeals, together with earlier ones, ¹⁶ led by the mid-1970s to the examining of 'the social process by which the Christian move-

but of whom
and to whom,
with what words,
at what time,
where,
to what intent,
with what circumstances,
considering what goeth before
and what followeth." (Marsh 1960:xiii).

13. Cf the lot that befell Tyndale (Demaray 1964:47).

14. Cf Hubery 1965:93.

15. Quotation from H J Cadbury, Current issues in New Testament study, in *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin* (1953), p 54.

16. E.g. the Chicago School, cf Kee 1980:11,17.

ment originated' (Kee 1980:17). A recent proponent of this approach has put it as follows:

Instead of biblical dogmas, we should get to know and appreciate the personages who embodied biblical faith. Instead of moral guidelines and theological propositions, we would discover social persons and the underpinnings of their interpersonal relations (Malina 1984:23).

What has been done in the field of the so-called sociological approach has already led to new insights and reinterpretations, and continued work in this direction will undoubtedly promote further progress 'towards a solution'.

An important component of this approach, that should have been used for 20 centuries instead of 20 years, is the study of the original Christianity within the context of the 'various life worlds' (Kee 1980:26) of its time. This should indeed be taken seriously, with regard to both the context of early Christianity and the context of contemporary Christianity, in the 'Bible and Religion Studies' of the future.

Including the entire cultural and religious setting of early Christianity does not imply that one is de-emphasising Christianity. On the contrary, such a wider perspective can enable one to identify the distinctiveness of Christianity. It is precisely in contrast with the then existing religious options that one can sense the impact of the Christian message and its life-transforming meaning.

Here, however, there is an important further step that may be of special value in our movement towards a solution. In addition to studying the essential differences between Christianity and its original environment we may also aim at experiencing something of what those early Christians must have experienced. In his book on *Liberating grace* - a book I can recommend very strongly - Leonardo Boff shows us how to move from static traditionalism ('Scholarly theology created a whole system about grace, using a whole terminology of its own and creating a well-defined doctrine' (Boff 1979:5)) to a dynamic, existential experience:

The important task is to analyze and articulate the experience of grace as it took place in a given era and a given cultural context. Yet the theological manuals make almost no reference to this fundamental aspect (Boff 1979:19).

2.3.2 The contexts in which the superstructure of Christian theology was established

It should be obvious that such a contextual experience can lead to a fresh revelation of original meaning, and cause a thrill which encourages one to open up one's indoctrinated ways of thinking to more real surprises. Having such expectations, we should therefore follow up Boff's complaints about tradi-

tional theology, and look for the contextual reasons behind the doctrines we have inherited.

On pp 2-3 above I have briefly mentioned some of the cultural pressures which could have induced early Christian leaders to depart from the adoc-trinal way of believing and living initiated by Jesus.¹⁷ Such a contextual interest could prompt us to ask contextual questions at crucial points in the history of Christian theology. We could explore why defensive or reactive or scholastic positions were adopted. We could try to understand why certain preoccupa-tions (for example with 'Christology') apparently caused tangential deviations from the essential core which Paul highlighted in Rm 12:1-2 ('Offer your-selves as a living sacrifice to God ... This is the true worship that you should offer. ... let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind ...'), and which Boff (1979:15) still highlights when he writes:

Grace is essentially encounter and relationship. It is God communi-cating himself and human beings opening themselves up.

Such a contextual revisiting of the history of Christian theology may cause surprising progress towards our envisaged solution. It may lead to dramatic reinterpretations. When we realise how certain views, which are regarded by some Christians (leaders and/or followers) as divinely inspired, actually originated in a context of hierarchical, ecclesiastic authority and conflict, we may be divinely guided to relativise such views. When we are reminded about the reinterpretations which dawned upon Christian theologians,¹⁸ we may be further encouraged to go ahead with all the reinterpreting we are challenged to.

Of special importance, of course, are the recent reinterpretations, which are indeed liberating Christian theology from some aspects of its long-term cap-tivity. I trust that our congress papers and discussions dealing with this issue have provided us with enough stimulating insights in this regard. As at a pre-vious occasion (Malan 1987) I wish to emphasise, however, that we should not be satisfied with a limited amount of liberation, but that we should not hesitate to be guided into surprising new possibilities.

2.3.3 The context in which Biblical Studies was introduced and devel-oped

At last year's meeting of the Work group on contextualising it was aptly said that we have to admit, and investigate, the context from which Biblical Stud-ies emerged three decades ago and developed since.

17. Cf Grollenberg 1979:28-37.

18. 'In 1545 Luther said that this recognition [the reinterpretation of "righteousness"] changed the whole Bible for him and that he re-interpreted other words in the light of his experience' (Schwarz 1955:168). And Calvin (yes, Calvin!) 'insisted that the good Bible student must train himself to listen to the biblical writer instead of making a passage support the ideas already held before a study of the text' (Mayer 1967:28-29).

At the first Biblical Studies conference (1974) the following (as translated) was said about the introduction in 1969 of Biblical Studies as a stds 9-10 subject in Transvaal [White] Secondary Schools:

I say it was a day of joy when the announcement was made because, by introducing Biblical Studies as a school subject in its own right, a great breakthrough was made for the practising of theological science at school level as well (Duvenage 1974:1).¹⁹

This was said by a professor from the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, where Biblical Studies was introduced as a tertiary subject in 1954,²⁰ and where a particular version of 'theological science' was propagated.

In the same paper the basic principle and general aim of Biblical Studies were quoted with emphatic endorsement from the Joint Matriculation Board syllabus for Biblical Studies (stds 8-10) as it was introduced in 1974 (to be examined in std 10 from 1976²¹ onwards):

Basic principle

The syllabus is based on the Bible as the inspired Word of God which is accepted as the supreme rule of faith and life.

General aim

A study of the Bible as revelation of God and containing the substance of the Christian faith and life.

In 1983 our Society approved a core syllabus for Biblical Studies at Southern African universities, which was aimed at providing the student with (as translated) 'knowledge, insight and skills in meaningful and logical units', while studying 'the Bible as Book' in an 'integrated' way (Old and New Testament), 'assessing' the results of theological research and 'employing it in a practical way, for example in a professional situation.'²²

At our congress of five years ago I was requested to present a Panorama of Biblical Studies. At that stage secondary and tertiary syllabuses and questionnaire responses from universities and colleges led me to the conclusion that parts of the overall scene were encouraging, but others disappointing. Particularly encouraging was the emphasis on 'the implications for ... daily living, relationships with God and fellow-men, the current situation in South Africa'

19. 'Ek sê dit was 'n blye dag toe aankondiging gekom het omdat, met die invoering van Bybelkunde as volwaardige vak op skool, daar 'n groot deurbraak gemaak is vir die beoefening van die teologiese wetenskap ook op skoolvlak.'

20. According to Prof Duvenage during the reading of his paper.

21. Precisely the year during which language issues (representing a whole attitude) imposed on schools caused a revolt!

22. '... kennis, insig en vaardigheid in sinvolle en logiese eenhede', 'die Bybel as Boek', 'geïntegreerd', 'te beoordeel en prakties te gebruik, byvoorbeeld in 'n beroepsituasie'.

found in the responses of five universities and seven colleges. I therefore concluded the paper with a hopeful paragraph:

If we are inspired by such convictions, we may indeed co-operate in the planning of Biblical Studies for a new era. If what we are concerned about is the understanding of the Bible, the message of life-transformation, and especially also the penetrating message for the situation in which our South African community finds itself, then our future prospect may fill us with a dynamic hope. Then our panorama is not a sunset scene, but a sunrise vista (Malan 1988:54).²³

Should we not now, in 1992, with inspired guidance and courage to contextualise and to reinterpret, cooperate towards a solution which could rectify the prejudices and misunderstandings which seemed to be prevalent in the early days of Southern African Biblical Studies? Prof Duvenage's 1974 paper contains emphatic criticism (understandable in terms of the theological and political context concerned) of hermeneutical and multi-faith openness. On our way towards a solution we may therefore use several of his paragraphs as reminders about those threads that have been deliberately dropped by some of us but need to be picked up again and need to be taken seriously in our frank discussions.

2.3.4 The context in which we are privileged to live

When we explore life-situations of previous times, such as those of the authors of biblical books and those of scholars during the history of Christian theology and Biblical Studies, we have to use the skill of receptive reading of both the written communication and the non-written implications between the lines, as well as the gift of creative imagination.²⁴ With regard to our present life-situation we may do the same, and more. Here we are constantly receiving innumerable verbal (written and spoken) and non-verbal messages. And here we usually have the opportunity and responsibility to respond.

I trust that four papers as well as parts of others and several discussions have given us more than enough stimulating ideas on contextualising here and now. As a matter of fact, the semantic field in which 'contextualising' is most often used, seems to be precisely that of our present socio-political and economic situation.

Perhaps more than ever before we are taking the life-relatedness of the Bible, and especially of the New Testament, seriously. But are we indeed taking it seriously enough, particularly at the end of our congress on *The Bible, Theology and our context*, and as we are about to return to our situations of living

23. These last two metaphors were intended to share, respectively, a needed warning, and a word-play on the venue which hosted that congress (and our present one).

24. 'It is one thing, for example, to know everything that there is to know about the world of Paul. It is quite another thing to see the world through Paul's eyes. The latter step is an act of creative imagination' (Lochhead 1984:88).

and teaching? Are we really willing to cooperate towards a solution that will liberate us from the oppressive ideologies and the oppressive theologies²⁵ of the past, from a narrow-minded, superficial Christianity and a limited, subservient type of Biblical Studies? A solution that will lead us to a creative, dynamic and perfectly valid reinterpretation of established interpretations of the Bible?

Let me re-emphasise that there is no need to fear that a radical reinterpretation will affect the original Good News of Christianity. On the contrary, by demoting cultural issues of ancient times from their dominant positions in Christian traditionalism, and by totally dismissing anti-Christian notions²⁶ from the Christian scene, we are exactly focusing our more concentrated attention on the uncomplicated, powerful Christian message. At the same time we may bear in mind that the survival of this message through 20 (and especially the first 4 and the next 14) centuries provides a convincing testimony to its inherent and unchanging significance.²⁷

3. Relevantising the Bible in our teaching

Being delivered from fear facilitates our progress to a solution with regard to both components of our problem. Fear may indeed be regarded as one of the root causes of traditionalism and of authoritarianism. An uncertain position and/or an inferiority complex may tempt one to entrench oneself in a traditionalistic religiosity and to teach with a doctrinaire authoritativeness. Deliverance may begin either when fear is overcome or when the superficiality of the isms is discovered, but whatever happens to be the first step, the second, as well as any further consequences, are sure to follow.

3.1 The inevitability of life-related relevance in Bible and Religion Studies

As outlined above (pp 52-53) reinterpretation is inevitable in Bible Studies and in Christianity. And perhaps the best explanation of that inevitability is the similar inevitability of relevantising in Christianity and therefore also in Bible Studies.

If throughout the past 20 centuries the Christian message had been proclaimed as relevantly as the original teaching of Jesus, we would not have needed the verb relevantise. Unfortunately, however, the temptation to abstractise was

25. Cf Gundry 1971:260.

26. Cf *apartheid* theology's interpretation of 'convenient' Old Testament 'proof texts'.

27. Against this background we may remember that biblical examples of reinterpretation may also be used to show how much meaning can indeed be obtained from an ordinary, even a naive, reading of the passages concerned. On the one hand this reassures our students and ourselves that our years of uncritical Bible study have not been meaningless. But then, on the other hand, it provides a frame of reference revealing the striking difference between a limited interpretation and a liberating reinterpretation.

and still is strong. So, whether or not we use the unfamiliar verb *relevantise*,²⁸ we, as committed Christian believers and Bible Studies teachers can in no way evade the challenge to life-relatedness.

In the introduction to the Developing in Christ course, the following 'good reasons' for using the 'life-approach' are given:

This is the way the Bible came to be written. First, people experienced an event. Then, through reflection, they realised that God was at work in that event. It taught them much about themselves and the meaning of their life and relationships, so they recorded it, first orally, then in writing. ...

Jesus, likewise, used this method in His teaching. He helped people to explore an experience of their lives, to really think about it, then he would bring a new dimension of truth to their consciousness and enlighten their understanding; always leaving the response open as an invitation, because faith is free (Advisory Board for Christian Education in Zimbabwe 1983:3).

With such an irrefutable rationale this method stands in stark contrast to the 5th century model of moulding 'statues for God' (cf p 50 above), and also all the more recent and contemporary replica producing methods. We have to remember that some of these models are very tempting on account of their use of established Christian phraseology, latest high technology and colourful, glossy material. But if they appear to be authoritative, casuistic constructions, our students should be protected against them, from preparatory school level onwards. Most recently, Prof Ferdinand Deist has launched a convincing plea to drop 'the classical "systematic" education', realising that 'Christian faith is not in the first place about factual information that one assimilates in one's mind, but about the acquiring of a view of life and an attitude to life which give meaning to life' (Deist 1991:3,4, as translated).²⁹ The Religion Education that will 'not stop them' [from committing themselves to be guided by God] (Deist 1991:title³⁰) is a 'Religion Education that is relevant, a Religion Education that addresses a child in his/her own context and about his/her own problems' (Deist 1991:80³¹).

28. 'To summarise, I am contending that relevancy - or whatever word we might use to mean "really addressing the situation in all its particularity" - is an essential element for any Christian witness' (Linda Mercadanti, at a 1983 conference on *Conflict and context: Hermeneutics in the Americas*, quoted in Branson and Padilla 1986:61).

29. Afr.: 'Ek wil pleit dat ons in ons godsdiensonderrig ... moet afsien van die klassieke "sistematie" onderrig. Buitendien gaan dit in die Christelike geloof nie in die eerste plek oor feitelike informasie wat 'n mens met jou verstand verwerk nie, maar oor die aankweek van 'n lewensbeskouing en 'n lewenshouding wat sin gee aan die lewe.'

30. The title (Afr.: *Verhinder hulle nie*) contains an obvious reference to Mt 19:14.

31. Afr.: 'Godsdiensonderrig wat *relevant* is, godsdiensonderrig wat 'n kind in sy eie konteks en oor sy eie probleme aanspreek ...'

3.2 The scope of relevant Bible Studies teaching

Although the actual topics studied by tertiary students will obviously differ from those studied by primary school children, the same degree of relevancy is definitely needed in both cases. At no stage, not even after we have reached our envisaged 'solution', may the call to relevancy be ignored. It means that at all levels we have to look for topics, questions and problems related to human life at the age and in the situation concerned. It obviously also means that wherever possible - and in most cases this is possible - input from the students will be most useful.

If we are open to topical issues from real life, we may of course expect a large variety. That should never discourage us, however. The remarkable life each of us is privileged to enjoy for a limited period is part of a creation with a limitless variety. And the Bible, as a book from real life in all its fullness, is also a book addressing real life as it is lived.

Part, and usually a very topical part, of this variety is the assortment of religious options, as well as the whole range of philosophical and ideological views and popular conceptions. If the Biblical Studies of the past has mainly ignored this reality, we as solution oriented planners of Bible and Religion Studies for the future will have to take it into account. But, once again, this need not to be seen as a threat that will de-emphasise Christianity. Experience usually point in exactly the opposite direction. A really meaningful view gains convincing power when it is 'compared' with other views in the same field.

Another very important ingredient of an updated Bible and Religion Studies should be that of accepting the findings of the natural and human sciences. This too is no threat that will invalidate the Bible or parts of it. On the contrary, the scientific progress during the centuries between the Bible and us can only increase our amazement and praise when we study the ancient, pre-scientific poetry on the miracles of creation. Of special interest to us as Christians are the findings of the human sciences: anthropology, sociology, education, linguistics, psychology, and all their specialised versions like communication studies, conflict studies, political studies and human relationship studies. We should indeed encourage our students to study these sciences honestly, fearlessly and responsibly. But then we should also show them how often the essentially Christian message of an honest, unselfish way of thinking and a Christlike attitude of genuine love can take human science findings into a further dimension.

Two more quotations from Boff's *Liberating grace* are most appropriate here:

Grace enables science to stick to its proper aim: the task of revealing the rationality of the real. Science will then pursue its investigations respectfully, aware that it is the recipient of a present. It will formulate and tackle a given problem in such a way that the world and human beings are humanized rather than manipulated for selfish interests or the quest for power (Boff 1979:62).

And if grace does signify being in relationship with God, then the way is open to experiencing this relationship.

By the same token this view of grace also brings us to the theme of the human being as a person, as a being who is supremely relational. A human being is in reality a web of living, operative relationships (Boff 1979:43).

3.3 Modest ways of teaching

The unauthoritarian approach we are talking about self-evidently requires modest ways of teaching. The solution we are looking for will therefore have to liberate us from all attempts to instil proven facts and doctrines into respectfully docile classes of students. As already emphasised sufficiently I hope, we have to acknowledge the good intentions and serious convictions behind the method of indoctrinating with 'sound' knowledge and 'indisputable' truths. Here too, therefore, our way to a solution will have to include frank discussions at negotiating tables accommodating all the parties concerned as well as facilitators who can clearly distinguish between Christian, non-Christian and anti-Christian perspectives.

Nothing prevents us, however, from teaching Bible and Religion Studies in enthusiastic but modest ways. In order to become better equipped for this mode of sharing life-related insights with our younger contemporaries we should keep exploring the fascinating fields of religion and of Christian religion. Candid discussions on questions like *What is religion?*³² and *What about the New Testament?*³³ may lead us further away from an unchristian-like arrogance³⁴ and more towards a truly Christlike humility.³⁵

3.4 Concluding summary

As an ancient religious book that originated in real life-situations and that addresses the real life-situations of its readers at all times, the Bible has to be constantly reinterpreted. Significant examples of reinterpretation are found in various parts of the Bible, and especially in the teaching of Jesus himself.

Jesus' own clear distinction between preceding and present contexts, and between old and new meanings, may stimulate us to explore the contexts in which the books of the Bible, Christian theology and Biblical Studies came

32. Alves 1984.

33. Hooker & Hickling 1975.

34. 'There is no place for arrogance in the Gospels, and true Christians are saved from that particular sin' (Mathews 1969:116).

35. Cf 'This provisional and humble theology will not be primarily interested in the task of establishing an abstract truth in a non-temporal sense, but will seek to set truth in time, as an historic, and therefore effective, force' (Assmann 1975:122).

into being. Context study can become remarkably meaningful if it includes experiments of imaginatively entering the personal and social situations and experiences of our predecessors in their cultural and religious settings.

A scholarly, imaginative, contextual study may play an important part in guiding us towards a responsible reinterpretation in which the original and essential message of Christianity is endorsed in present-day language, and according to the needs of our present situation, but in which any non- or anti-Christian ideas, doctrines or customs are exposed.

Such an honest, fearless reinterpretation obviously goes hand in hand with the revitalising, wherever necessary, of the original life-relatedness of the Christian message. Unfortunately this essential feature of Christianity was, and still is, too often de-emphasised.

So, if Christianity and Christian Studies (including Bible and Religion Studies) are to be experienced as really relevant in the new South Africa, the solution we are planning will have to be one which restores the emphasis on life-transformation that was jeopardised by well-intentioned traditionalism and authoritarianism. It will have to be a solution enabling us to teach Bible and Religion Studies modestly but convincingly in the socio-political, economic, scientific life-situation as we approach and move into the 21st century. Most probably it will be a solution challenging students and teachers with many questions, and with perspectives as the following:

Among the religions of the world Christianity stands out. Basically it does not regard itself as a religion but as the divine life itself penetrating human life (Boff 1979:120).

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