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SOUTH-AFRICANISING BIBLICAL STUDIES

An epistemological and hermeneutical inquiry

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Abstract

Cultural, historical and political differences play a major role in epistemology and hermeneutics, and therefore in all understanding. If such differences are not catered for in the construction of syllabi for Biblical Studies the result is cultural, historical and political imperialism. The subject is then also rendered irrelevant to pupils from a background differing from that of the planners. It is argued that a more inclusive and problem oriented approach should be followed in the construction of syllabi for Biblical Studies to allow differently informed epistemologies and hermeneutical convictions to interact in a deconstructive manner in order to encourage an eventual reconstruction of a more unified approach to the subject in South Africa.

More than twenty years ago the British psychiatrist R D Laing said:

> We live in a moment of history where change is so speeded up that we begin to see the present only when it is already disappearing.

This is also true of South Africa. If it is the function of religion to, amongst other things, help people find meaning in life one would expect religious thinkers in this country to be returning to their drawing boards quite often. Yet, syllabi for Biblical Studies in schools, colleges and universities do not seem to respond to changes taking place in South Africa. Yes, we do rearrange elements of our syllabi and, yes, we do adopt other methods of biblical interpretation, but we have up to now not really changed our hermeneutical vantage point. This contribution intends

(a) to discuss the implications of the epistemological and hermeneutical assumptions of present syllabi for Biblical Studies for our context, and

(b) to suggest an alternative vantage point. [1]

1. Although I take full responsibility for what is being said in this paper, I wish to thank my colleagues Dr Klippies Kritzinger (Missiology), Dr Wilfred Sebothoma (New Testament), Prof Gerald Pillay (Church History), Prof Kobus Krüger (Science of Religion), Prof Willem Vorster (Institute for

1. Preliminary remarks

In what follows I shall be referring to 'Western' and 'African' thinking. I am cognisant of the dangers involved in such an endeavour. First of all there is the danger of creating the impression that one uses typologies and stresses cultural differences with a view to creating distance - of which Fabian (1983) accuses traditional anthropology. However, this article is aimed at encouraging what Fabian calls 'coevalness', and has no intention whatsoever to create distance, as will become clear from the ensuing argument in which the problematic simultaneity of different, conflicting forms of consciousness (Fabian 1983:146) and the failure of current syllabi to address the problem, are discussed.

Secondly, there is the danger of typological oversimplification of what actually constitutes a complex variety (Wiredu 1987:153; Hountondji 1983: 34) in Africa as well as in the West. Fabian (1983:23) suspects every form of typology of creating spacial distance between cultures. I would suggest that constructing a typology as a strategy to simplify complexities for the sake of discussion, which is what I am doing here, does not entail a negative ideological attitude. A more real danger of typologies is the glossing over of important historical and cultural variables. Outlaw (1987:35) and Oruka (1987; also Kaphagawani 1987:141-142) are correct: there is no, and never has been, any single 'Western philosophy,' while the mere generalisation inherent in the term 'African philosophy' is problematical. But one has to take the risk, for Outlaw (1987:34) is also right when he asserts:

> No living person is accidentally or secondarily African or European, that is to say, is of a particular race or ethnicity 'accidentally' while being a 'person' or 'human' *substantively*. While some important gains have been realized in the political arena with the help of the 'substantive-accident' and 'universal-particular' strategies of Western metaphysics, to forget that they are precisely *strategies* and use them to conceptualize concrete persons or peoples as though they capture and express differences of our effective history is to succumb to some of the worst seductions of the dominant voices of mainstream Western Philosophy: the premature, false abstract universality of an equally false abstract humanity invoked prior to the holding of appropriate conversations in which all of the key issues, including 'rationality' and 'human' are themselves the first matters of discussion.

The typologies I use in this article are not constructed with a view to making a contribution in the field of anthropology or epistemology - in which case a much more detailed and sophisticated analysis would be called for - but in order to make a point about the selective and ideological nature of syllabi for Biblical Studies. If the argument presented here is valid, we shall have to embark on a much more

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Theological Research), Prof Jasper Burden (Old Testament), and Prof Chris Swanepoel (African Languages) for their critical discussion of the ideas expressed here, as well as for their valuable suggestions towards improving the formulation.

sophisticated research programme on African and Western philosophies. But even that would not be enough. To be informed about traditional African wisdom, is not to be informed about black people in South Africa, just as traditional Western philosophy does not supply us with information about how white people in South Africa view the world. [2] Apart from the fact that our political history and urbanisation effected major changes in traditional African culture and that acculturation caused differentiation in 'black' and 'white' views, literature on views held by South Africans treats only of adults, while youth cultures remain unresearched. If we are talking about school syllabi it is on this terrain that we need information. Hopefully the present exercise, lop-sided as it is because of a lack of knowledge, will stimulate this kind of research. But precisely because of the lack of knowledge underlying this article it cannot be more than a mere experiment in arguing about relevant syllabi.

Thirdly, there is another danger of oversimplification. This article concentrates on the influence of different sets of cultural information on epistemological assumptions, and speaks about culture in a somewhat idealistic manner. As will become clear as we proceed, there are also other, and for our context perhaps even more important, sets of information influencing epistemological assumptions, namely people's socio-economic and political histories and beliefs. To have incalculated these histories in an experiment like this would certainly have brought it closer to 'what is actually happening,' but would have complicated matters to such an extent that it would be difficult to formulate a clear argument within the span of a few pages. True to the example of biblical parables this article merely intends to make one statement which can serve as a starting point for further creative thought about the enormous complexities of real life situations.

Fourthly, in talking about 'culture' there is the danger of white people like me conceptualising African philosophy by postulation rather than by intuition (Oruka 1987:65; Van Niekerk 1988:12, 15). The best I have at hand in respect of 'African' (ethno)philosophy is John Mbiti's *African religion and philosophy*. Though this book has often been criticised (and in the course of the argument I shall refer to such criticisms) I am sure that Mbiti at least comes much closer to intuition than I can ever hope to come.

2. The epistemology and hermeneutic of existing syllabi for Biblical Studies

The basic presupposition underlying syllabi for Biblical Studies on school level is that of idealism, if not Platonism, that is, they focus on the systematic teaching of the contents of the Bible, the biblical message, and the teachings of the church. For

2. Moreover, the example used here, namely Kantian philosophy, is by far not representative of 'Western' philosophy. After Kant, Hegel tried to overcome Kant's dualism through idealism, while Marx - and after him the sociologists of knowledge - shifted from idealism to materialism. This state of affairs once again emphasises the experimental and provisional character of this paper.

instance, in the introduction to the new syllabus for Biblical Studies (Department of Education and Culture 1989:2) we read the following about the cognitive aims of the syllabus:

Cognitive aims:

To conduct an academic, scientific study of the Bible. Among other components, such a study incorporates the following:

* a general introduction to the Bible as a whole and to selected individual books of the Bible;

* a study of types of literature found in the Bible ;

* a study of the contents, message and meaning of the Bible;

* establishment of relevant links with biblical background ;

* a study of the elementary rules of biblical exegesis ;

* a study of stipulated topical biblical themes.

2.1 Epistemological assumptions

The unarticulated supposition underlying such content-oriented syllabi accepts as a matter of course that there is something like the contents of the Bible *quoad se* which can, through the application of an 'academic' and 'scientific', that is, objective strategy, be abstracted in a pure form (see Van Niekerk 1988:14). Casañas (1984: 125) identified the following implications of this presupposition:

> As if instinctively, they [the Churches] reject the historical relativization of their faith and their most important options ... Their ideas seem to them 'clear and distinct,' eternal, certain, almost subsistent, unlike those of 'savages' or children.

The planners who set these goals seem to be have been unaware of what physicists have discovered long ago, namely that the mere act of ob~serving an object disturbs the object itself. Rund (1962:5) wrote in this regard:

> In short, the observer disturbs the object of his observation, *and this is a matter of principle,* namely one which is fundamentally epistemological.

The mere act of reading the Bible thus disturbs the Bible itself. Therefore there cannot be something like the eternal, unchanging and certain message of the Bible. To state the message of the Bible means to have conceptualised it first. Conceptualising implies a process of conception (from a father [the Bible] and a mother [the reader]) which leads to the birth of a third 'personality', different from the father and the mother.

That this is so can be illustrated by a critique of Kantian thought categories within our own context. According to Kant every human being is, as it were, equipped with a mind map which orders sense data in terms of time and space, so that a concept of an object is the mind's ordered picture of that (amorphous) object (Störig 1972:61-65). Let us accept this insight and investigate its consequences for our theme.

According to popular Western thinking time is something abstract, something mathematical, as it were. [3] Therefore time can be measured in its own right and according to its own criteria (e g seconds, minutes, hours, days, months and years). That is why we assign abstract symbols to events, e g 12h00, 13 April, 2000 BC, *et cetera*.

Time, further, begins in the past, moves through the present and on to the future. That is why, in our courses in Biblical Studies we always start at the earliest point possible in the past (depending upon our criteria for historicity that may be the time of Adam and Eve, the patriarchs, Moses or David). From there we systematically treat each age up to our time (that is, if church history is included in the syllabus).

Finally, in Western thinking the most important dimension of time is the future. Time is moving towards a point where history will culminate. This is evident from the West's pre-occupation with evolution and progress. It is for this reason that we number the years backward and forward relative to Christ's birth. Prior to the birth of Christ everything had been moving towards that point, and after Christ everything is moving towards a final culmination, which may be presented as an ideal state, the end of the present order, or the second coming of Christ. Because of this feature of the Western concept of time Westerners tend to evaluate present actions in terms of the future culmination of history, that is, according to future ideals, rather than in terms of past reality. Futurology, rather than history, thus forms the basis of Western planning and ethics. Consequently change, rather than stability, is the driving force in Western societies.

In respect of space one finds the same 'abstract' attitude in the West. Space by definition has three dimensions. Therefore one can even assign co-ordinates to an imaginative dot. Things are conceived of in terms of their extension in space. What has no extension is, for all practical purposes, regarded as non-existent.

Traditional African philosophy's conceptions of time and space differ substantially from Western conceptions. For instance, according to traditional African thinking time is not an abstract or empty 'dimension' *a priori*, but 'exists' only in so far as something is happening or had been happening during the passage of time. [4] What has not (yet) happened, or what is not imminent, is not real, and can therefore not be expressed in terms of time. The category of 'future' is thus not part of time, or falls in the category of No-Time. Moreover, time does not move from the past into the future, but from the present into the past. Therefore, traditional African thinking makes no provision for 'progress' in, or for a 'future culmination' of, history. Consequently the meaning of time does not lie in the future, but in the past, so that

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3. Fabian (1983:2-21) writes a short, illuminating, history of the Western concept of time, which can be summarised in his own words as 'Time ... was not only secularized and naturalized, but also spacialized' (1983:16).

4. The popular conception that Africa's time concept is 'circular' while that of the West is 'linear' can be defended as little as the notion that the Canaanite notion of time had been 'circular', while that of the Hebrews had been 'linear'. See, in this regard, Roberts (1976; Deist 1981:27.

an act of the present should not be interpreted in terms of its possible future consequences, but in terms of its analogies in the past (Mbiti 1988:15-27). Mythology and history, rather than futurology, thus form the basis of African planning and ethics. Consequently stability, rather than change, is the driving force in traditional African societies. [5]

Regarding African conceptions of space Mbiti (1988:27) writes:

> Space and time are closely linked, and often the same word is used for both. As with time, it is the content which defines space. What matters most to the people is what is geographically near, just as Sasa embraces the life that people experience.

From the preceding we may conclude that even if Kant might have been right in assuming that time and space constitute basic human thought categories, he was certainly wrong in assuming the universal validity of their definitions. This conclusion is corroborated by

(a) Fabian's (1983:2-21) description of the changing meaning of Western concepts of time and space over the last two centuries,

(b) the fact that the twentieth century has seen the epistemological debate shifting from the objective thought categories of idealism to questions pertaining to the sociology of knowledge (Deist 1983:33-40), as well as by

(c) the findings of theoretical physicists. In this regard Heisenberg (1969:169) writes:

> ... wenn Kant die Anschauungsformen Raum und Zeit und die Kategorie Kausalität als *a priori* zur Erfahrung bezeichnet, so begibt er sich damit in die Gefahr, sie gleichzeitig absolut zu setzen und zu behaupten, dass sie auch inhaltlich in beliebigen physikalischen Theorien der Erscheinungen in gleicher Form auftreten müssten. Dies is aber nicht der Fall, wie durch Relativitätstheorie und Quantentheorie erwiesen wird.

That Mbiti (whose exposition of African concepts I followed above) generalises too much (Oruka 1987) is certainly true. Yet, there are many instances to which his insights do apply. And these instances - of which examples can also be found in South Africa - show the invalidity of the (unconscious) assumption underlying our present syllabi, namely that the contents of Kantian thought categories are universally valid. It is for this reason that the proposed syllabus, without even reflecting on the nature of the employed thought categories, can purport to expose

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5. An analogy to the difference in outlook between traditional Western and African peoples may be found in the difference between organic and causal views of life in the natural sciences. Heisenberg (1969:154) describes this difference of opinion as follows: 'Die beiden Betrachtungsweisen widersprechen einander. Denn im einen Fall setzen wir voraus, dass das Geschehen durch Zweck bestimmt ist, dem es dient, durch das Ziel, auf das es gerichtet ist; im anderen glauben wir, dass es durch das unmittelbar vorhergehende Geschehen, die unmittelbar vorhergehende Situation festgelegt ist'.

the contents and message of the Bible - also for black pupils. [6] And precisely that assumption of universality renders our syllabi ideologically biased. [7]

At this stage we must point out once more that it would be a gross oversimplification of the South African situation merely to talk about, and incalculate in our discussion, traditional African and traditional Western cultures, as we have done up to now. The South African situation itself is far more complex. I merely wanted to show that culture and epistemology are closely related. The fact that our situation is even more complex thus renders our syllabi so much the more inadequate.

Understanding the Bible's message means to picture it in terms of one's thought categories. Given the culturally informed thought categories of the planners and the writers of text books, their mere observing (reading) the Bible already disturbs it. An awareness of this fact will already

(a) guard us against the myth of 'objectivity' (see Carew 1987:104f) underlying the proposed syllabus;

(b) prevent us from identifying 'biblical principles' and 'biblically authoritative ethical guidelines' with our rational constructions - as the proposed syllabus implies;

(c) question a fundamental presupposition of the syllabus, namely that we are teaching people the contents of the Word of God, and will,

(d) begin to answer Newbigin's (1986:22) question:

> As people who are part of modern Western culture, with its confidence in the validity of scientific methods, how can we move from the place where we explain the gospel in terms of our modern scientific world- view to the place where we explain our modern scientific world-view from the point of view of the gospel?

2.2 Hermeneutical assumptions

We read in the proposed syllabus: 'The syllabus is based on the Bible as the inspired and inerrant Word of God.' The equation of the Bible with the Word of God and the (fundamentalist) terminology used here betray the assumption of a timeless, normative message emanating from the Bible. This is also clear from the formulation of the affective and normative aim 'to show pupils how to find guidelines ... in the Word of God - the Word that carries authority for faith, teaching and life.' According to the syllabus we should thus deduce authoritative principles from the eternal Word to guide us in our day to day ethical decisions.

Underlying this aim is the Platonic principle ascribing priority to soul over body, mind over matter, essence over contingency, and principle over practice. This way of

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6. Since the article is especially concerned about (white) syllabi being prescribed to black pupils, I ignore for the moment the fact that such a syllabus might prove to be irrelevant even to white children from different environmental and church backgrounds.

7. I am not going into other implications of the syllabus, such as that its presupposed epistemology and authoritarian postulation of the truth reflect, *inter alia*, assumptions about power relations.

thinking may make sense (to certain sections) in the West, where idealism and Platonism had become accepted hermeneutic strategies.

However, traditional African thinking does not give priority to the idea, but to action, not to theory but to practice. Thus an idea cannot be right or wrong in principle or *in abstracto*. It can only be judged once the idea has materialised in a deed, and the deed can only be called right if its outcome is beneficial, and wrong if its outcome is harmful for the community of people in which the act was accomplished (Mbiti 1988:204-215). Traditional African thinking thus proceeds from a premise directly opposite to that of Platonism. In terms of Western categories one could call this premise pragmatic rather than idealist, practical rather than theoretical.

A syllabus designed on the basis of idealist premisses would thus probably make sense to a person subscribing to Western tradition, but not to a person from traditional African culture. Yet, our syllabi are based squarely on the epistemological and hermeneutical foundations of Western culture. And once again the South African situation is far more complex than suggested by the simple comparison between traditional African and Western (ethno)philosophies offered in the preceding argument - a fact that even more seriously calls in question the adequacy of the present syllabi.

3. Epistemology, culture, and standards of education

Contrary to popular belief, there is - in terms of Kantian epistemology - no difference whatsoever between Africa and the West regarding the existence of

(a) *a priori* thought categories, or

(b) rationality/logicality.

To follow Kant: like Westerners, Africans conceptualise through the categories of time and space. Like Westerners, Africans form judgements by the application of logic (Oruka 1987:56) - logic being, according to Kant, the mind's capacity to combine concepts (*Begriffe*) to form judgements (*Urteile*). [8]

8. In making a distinction between 'thought categories' and their 'cultural content', I am nót sharing the views criticised by Van Niekerk (1988:7). Speaking about the term 'African thinking' she says: 'It assumes, in the first place, that there is something like an autonomous activity called "thinking", and that there are different modes of this autonomous activity of which "African thinking" is the one mode that, like a spade, can be called by its name and be isolated for close inspection and "special treatment" because it is decidedly different and "other" and exotic. "Our" thinking on the other hand is so obviously normal, we don't have to refer to it as a type of thinking belonging to ús ...' My argument runs contrary to such a supposition: even though - perhaps precisely because áll thought systems are culturally and historically informed, I take them to be logical in their own terms, and therefore not as comparatively 'abnormal'.

The differences pointed out above concern the cultural assumptions inherent in the respective thought categories of space and time [9] themselves, which in their turn necessarily affect the outcome of logical judgements. And this is not merely a matter of accident. One may ascrie such differences to enculturation, socialisation, internalisation, socio-economic factors, and political experience, which incidentally would be true. But culture and history are not, like liberal ideology likes to believe, accidents 'added' to a human being. To quote Outlaw (1987:32) once again:

> No living person is accidentally or secondarily African or European, that is to say, is of a particular race or ethnicity 'accidentally' while being a 'person' or 'human' *substantively* ... [T]o use [the 'substantive-accident' and 'universal-particular' strategies of Western metaphysics] to conceptualize concrete persons or peoples as though they capture and express differences of our effective history is to succumb to some of the worst seductions of the dominant voices of mainstream Western Philosophy.

Following Lemaire and Fabian, Van Niekerk (1988:48) correctly states:

> [C]ommunication, language, society are not things *possessed* by human beings but things that constitute him/her *as* human beings. They mark his/her being as temporal and material and finite and therefore as historical and political.

Because of the differences in cultural (and other) information embedded in thought categories, every *Ding an sich* (or *noumenon*) perceived by the senses is constituted accordingly by the mind (cf, however, our remarks on cultural relativism below). [10] If, as Kant pointed out, we cannot speak about a *noumenon*, but only about its rational construction, people from fundamentally different cultural and historical backgrounds, although they may be referring to the same *noumenon*, do not speak about the same rational construction. [11]

Precisely because we are dealing with culturally and historically informed thought categories one cannot say of any one perspective compared to the other (e g an African or European rational construction) that it is correct or wrong, superior or inferior, modern or tribal, advanced or primitive. Every mental construction of the *Ding an sich* is based upon the relevant thought categories of space and time, and is as valid as any other construction. Consequently

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9. One should add 'and causality', for causality constitutes one of Kant's basic thought categories, and may differ among people according to the relevant (culturally defined) plausibility structures. The argument on time and space was, however, meant as an example, and not as a complete discussion of epistemological questions.

10. It is important to note here that it is not only culture that informs thought categories, but also ideologies within the same broad culture, and that differing sets of ideological information, too, contribute to the formation of different *Begriffe*, for the same *noumenon*. See, in this regard, Deist (1980).

11. Of course, this statement presents a gross generalisation, but is consciously overstated to stress the point.

(a) at least some analytical judgements explicating the implied meaning of a concept, and

(b) at least some synthetic judgements combining rational constructions

will to some extent be coloured by the implied assumptions of the relevant thought categories.

If this is true, and if our syllabi are based only upon constructions of (culturally informed) Western thought categories [12] with their consequent analytical and synthetic judgements, what then makes us so sure that our syllabi teach 'the contents and message of the Bible?', let alone 'the Word of God'? What makes us think that our rational constructions, explicated in and prescribed by the syllabi, will make sense to or even be relevant for African people?

We are confronted here by the problematic simultaneity of different, conflicting forms of consciousness (Fabian 1983:146). *Apartheid* systems of education viewed these differences in typically cultural relativist fashion according to which cultures exist next to each other like windowless monads (Van Niekerk 1988:28). That is why differences were seen as insurmountable obstacles and why they had been translated into policies aimed at reinforcing existing distance. Biblical Studies, dealing as it does with the Bible, which is the religious 'instruction book' for 80% or more of all South Africans, must help heal this scar. However, the present syllabi, instead of bridging the distance, still force African people to receive their education on the basis of Western epistemological assumptions, thereby contributing to feelings of alienation and resistance.

We will have to find a way of dealing with our subject that will prevent the creation of distance and that will foster mutual understanding.

But what then about academic standards?

To insist, like many liberals do, that Western style academic work should be copied in Africa in order to uphold 'academic standards,' is simply to echo the classical colonial superiority complex. [13] Standards are contextually defined. A very simple example can demonstrate the absurdity of viewing Western educational standards as superior. A qualified German veterinary surgeon is not allowed to practise in South Africa without having written additional examinations, just like a German or French lawyer cannot be directly admitted to South African law practice. Although we allow European trained ministers to immediately assume duty here, a person educated according to European 'standards' soon shows a lack of standard when appointed as

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12. These culturally informed thought categories are, of course, also informed by the philosophical and ideological preoccupations of the syllabus planners, a fact which makes the underlying supposition of the syllabus suspicious, namely to present pupils with *the* contents of *the* Word of God.

13. Van Niekerk (1988:10) puts her finger on this issue when she remarks about the term 'African thinking':'Have you ever thought of naming a course (in Western philosophy) "Non-African Thinking" ? No, because that would show the "true" colours ...' Similarly, the true colours of the colonial attitude would show if we spoke about 'non-African' standards.

a minister in a South African congregation, especially a black congregation. 'Standard' means to be adequately equipped

(a) to be able to recognise problems in a particular society, e g South African society,

(b) to theorise on those problems from a particular perspective (e g theology); and

(c) to come up with an acceptable solution for that situation.

Once we have succeeded in educating South Africans to do exactly that, we would have set our own standards. The question is not whether our students can solve Europe's problems but whether they can make an intelligent and morally defensible contribution to solving our own problems.

4. Towards a new hermeneutical vantage point

Before we embark on a search for a possible solution to our problem, we should first rid ourselves from the oversimplifications of the preceding argument. Up to now we have spoken about traditional African and Western epistemology and hermeneutics as if that distinction provided us with an adequate model for speaking about the South African situation. To begin with, we live in a community consisting of traditional Africans, Westernised Africans, Africanised Westerners, and traditional Westerners, with all shades of acculturation linking those categories. To be sure, already increasing literacy - acquired on the basis of Western-styled education - has influenced whatever 'traditional' African education a child might have received at home. 'Typically' traditional African views are to a large extent not shared by the millions of black people living in the cities, while rural white people do not necessarily share the traditional Western model of rationality. Studies published in the *Second Carnegie Inquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa* tell the story of differences developing between, for instance, the value systems of rural, peri-urban and urban black people (Moller, Schlemmer & Strijdom 1984), and of environmental and social problems experienced by particular groups of people within some of these communities, for example shanty town and hostel dwellers (Ntoane & Mokoetle 1984). New value systems, world-views and cultures emerge from these conditions, of which we as teachers are as good as ignorant. I am not aware of any study that can inform us about the specifics of those emerging cultures.

Studies such as the *Second Carnegie Inquiry*, apart from the fact that it focussed on socio-economic rather than on consequent philosophical and hermeneutic issues, present us with the views of adult people, while the syllabi we are talking about are aimed at educating children between the ages of 13 and 18. What do we know about the questions, problems and conceptual world of, for instance, the black and white youth? Black people have, over the past two decades or more, but especially since 1976, lived through extremely troubled times, which have not left them untouched. For one thing, the black youth has to a large extent become fascinated by (crude forms of) materialist hermeneutics and revolutionary ideas, both of which are quite foreign to 'traditional African' as well as to 'traditional Western thinking'. At the

same time the white youth, even though they have not been as directly involved in, or on the same side of, the physical conflict as blacks, have also not been left unchanged. Many of them have come to interpret the world quite differently from what they - and their parents - used to do five or ten years ago. What do we know about these changes in outlook? What do we know about the impact of these changes on the way people view reality? What do we know about the consequences of these changes on an epistemological and hermeneutical level?

We thus cannot merely adopt a traditional Western ór African basis for our syllabi, because a syllabus based on any one of these (or alternative) epistemologies will (at least) be irrelevant, even oppressive, [14] for a large section of the population. We also cannot afford to draw up separate syllabi for different groups of people or particular geographical areas, for that would amount to (re)creating windowless cultural gardens that will make communication in this country impossible, as has been adequately demonstrated by the results of the *apartheid* policy.

To my mind the epistemological clash referred to above, complicated by the cursory remarks on our respective political and economic histories, rather than confronting us with an insurmountable obstacle, presents us with an opportunity of taking a critical look at the implied assumptions of relevant South African thought systems. For instance, neither Western nor African or materialist [15] assumptions, neither black nor white experiences and histories, present us with the only possible or valid point of departure. All have advantages and are hampered by inefficiencies.

Let me use an example from theology in the context of traditional Western and African epistemologies. Is there something like a pure or mere 'concept' or idea, as Plato and Western dogmaticians would like us to believe? For instance, is their something like love *quoad se*, that is, can 'love' have mere conceptual existence? Or is love - like a stone - either there or non-existent? Is it not so that one can only speak of love in so far as someone loves someone else or something? Can one love somebody else 'in principle'? Or is love, rather than a Platonic concept or principle, an attitude in a concrete relationship? [16]

It is because love is a concrete attitude in a particular situation that one cannot 'love' God without loving one's neighbour. Therefore, there must be some truth in the (African) ethical view that it is acts that matter. Had we been following this line of

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14. What Van Niekerk (1988:18) says about courses in philosophy is *mutatis mutandis* valid for Biblical Studies: 'If our students are brainwashed with a notion of rationality that is reduced to "scientific progress" and "logical questions", if they learn that "hygienic thinking" is simply the kind of thinking that makes no logical errors, then the philosophers have turned themselves into accomplices of a repressive state'.

15. And even materialist (Marxist) assumptions would once more be European! See Van Niekerk (1988:21,30).

16. It is precisely in putting and answering these questions that liberation theology found the Achilles' heel of traditional Western theology. Liberation theology's insistence on dóing theology expresses its dislike of the Western inclination towards 'conceptual' theology.

thought it would have been impossible for pro-*apartheid* church people to have believed - as they did - that they, in spite of their distance, still loved their neighbours 'in principle', or that the church could be one 'in principle' without this unity being visible.

On the other hand, is it only when we see the effects of our conduct on society that we can decide whether we acted in love - which would be the consequence of traditional African ethics? Or is it possible to know right from wrong in the act of a relationship? I would surmise that an act in itself can be judged right or wrong. If this is true, then there must be some truth in the assumption that love as a criterion 'exists' apart from its 'application'.

If both views misconstrue love to some extent it might just be because love is something of both. Perhaps love can then not be a 'concept' that can be defined *in abstracto*, but should rather define conduct in a particular situation. For example, our love for the neighbour could then mean to love a person before he or she loves us, in spite of the other person's response, and by taking the other person's sin upon ourselves. If this is true, religion not merely 'finds expression' in one's attitude towards the neighbour - like a mathematical 'principle' is applied to a problem - but exists in love for the neighbour. If this is what religion is about, one can know right from wrong in the act of relating to someone else, and not only by hindsight.

Viewed in this way, the African assumption that it is acts that constitute time can be very helpful, since it allows us to view time, not as a mere mathematical abstraction, but as an ethical entity. At the same time the Western assumption that there is something like 'principles' according to which an act can in itself be judged right or wrong can be helpful as well, in that it allows us to judge actions by our conscience.

In the same way the African assumption that it is mythology and history, rather than futurology, that should form the basis of planning and ethics allows us to point to the Bible as a source of reference when confronted by present-day problems. At the same time the Western approach of evaluating present actions in terms of the future culmination of history, rather than with reference to past reality, can urge us to interpret the biblical documents in a critically creative manner, thus preventing us from merely repeating biblical conditions in our own time. For inherent in the fixation on tradition lies the danger Croatto (1983:37) has pointed out: 'Once the current social order is accepted because of tradition (and therefore internalized) as a copy of the divine model, then it is perceived as perfect and eternal.' From such an approach follows stagnation and oppression.

This 'merging' of African and Western epistemologies has major implications for moral behaviour. Piaget (1932) distinguished three stages in a child's moral development, namely a stage at which authoritative rules are important, a stage at which mutual consent forms the basis of morality, and a third stage which he calls the morality of equity, that is, a stage where it is not the rule or mutual consent but conscience that forms the basis of moral decisions.

The danger of remaining slaves of the 'rule' exists, whether we view the Bible as a book of principles (as Westerners tend to do) or whether we view it as a

mythological book from Zamani's distant past (as traditional Africans may tend to do). Instead, biblical examples should become part of an informed conscience that can then creatively evaluate new situations and take new decisions. If a person's conscience is only informed by the past, moral decisions tend to retain the *status quo*, while a fixation on the future results in an 'empty' conscience, that is, a conscience disinterested in past experience, or even present realities. We need information from the past as well as a view of the future in order to take creative moral decisions in the present.

But how are we to merge the various views and epistemologies?

First, by - at least for the time being - letting the various epistemologies (value systems, histories, and world-views) function, not as deductions from a 'higher' unity, but as complementary 'poles' in the sense of Niels Bohr's idea of complementarity (Heisenberg 1969:147, 155):

> Verschiedene Beobachtungssituationen ... sind eben häufig komplementär zu einander, dass heist sie schliessen einander aus, können nicht gleichzeitig verwirklicht werden, und die Ergebnisse der einen können nicht eindeutig mit denen der anderen verglichen werden ... Aber die beiden Betrachtungweisen ergänzen einander auch ...

However, in letting different views and epistemologies act as 'poles' one should not fall into the trap of cultural relativism. The doctrine of cultural relativism, however much truth it may contain (Bartlett 1979a), encapsules cultures in cultural gardens (Fabian 1983:47), thus denying the possibility of cross-cultural communication (Bloch 1977:283; Bartlett 1979b). Van Niekerk (1988:28) is correct:

> [H]owever open minded the cultural relativist stand might look, it is in fact a very conservative position. Its view of cultural relativism actually implies cultural closure.

The typologies of African and Western thought constructed above and the emphasis on difference and cultural diversity may also have created the impression that there remains no 'common ground' between African and Western culture that can make communication possible. That is, of course, not true. Even though Outlaw is correct in criticising liberal Westerners for assigning priority to 'humanity' over concrete people, it would not be correct to ignore the common humanity of people from different cultures. We have argued above that the categories of time, space and causality may be taken to constitute basic human thought categories. It is, amongst other things, such communalities that enable people of different cultures to communicate and under~stand each other. But much more important than that: we in South Africa share the same time and space and, although we might have vastly different conceptions of it, we have lived through the same troubled history, and we are facing the same future.

Arguing in favour of the 'polar' nature of African, Western and other episte~mologies is thus not to argue for cultural relativism [17] and the breakdown of communication, but exactly to urge people to acknowledge and accept their common humanity as well as their differences in outlook and experience. Such an acceptance will, instead of creating distance, encourage conscious efforts to understand and respect differing views and make us all wary of our own biases and presuppositions, thereby avoiding ideological claims to the possession of the truth.

Secondly, we can let the differing views interact in a deconstructive manner. I cannot phrase it better than Outlaw (1987:30-31) when he speaks about the confrontation between 'Western' and 'African' philosophies:

> [The strategies of African philosophy] preserve (are constituted by) the structure of 'differance' [sic]. For in each case the object of the strategy - the articulation of a 'text' of 'African philosophy' - is constituted *within* the bounds of that which it challenges, (i e, [Western] Philosophy), but as both the same (philosophy) and different (African). Such works have their distinct identity, through the rules governing discourses of/about P/philosophy, only in the difference, a difference gained through an ineliminable relation with that from which it differs.

It is thus not simply a question of 'enriching' Western philosophy by adding to it some elements of African philosophy, or *vice versa*, or of merging the two systems (see Van Niekerk 1988:72). It is also not a case of white people coming to understand 'black' thought, so that black behaviour can be tricked into serving white goals (Fabian 1983:51), or *vice versa.* The various approaches, views and histories must interact critically, the one deconstructing the other as it were, in order to facilitate the reconstruction of a *tertium*. This process finds its parallel in developments in theoretical physics, which is in the process of replacing Kant's *a priori* by a much more comprehensive theory of knowledge, about which Friedrich said (Heisenberg 1969:173):

> Es wäre an dieser Stelle sicher falsch, naturwissenschaftliches oder philophisches Wissen mit dem Satz >Jede Zeit hat ihre eigene Wahrheit< aufweichen zu wollen. Aber man muss sich doch gleichzeitig vor Augen halten, dass sich mit der historischen Entwicklung auch die Struktur des menschlichen Denkens ändert. Der Fortschritt der Wissenschaft vollzieht sich nicht nur dadurch, dass uns neue Tatsachen bekannt und verständlich werden, sondern auch dadurch, dass wir immer neu lernen, was das Wort >Verstehen< bedeuten kann. [18]

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17. Cultural relativism not only implies ethical relativism, but often also that the validity of particular arguments is relative to the relevant culture (Van Niekerk 1988:27), which makes a mockery of communication and argument.

18. Fanon (1982:179-180) speaks about 'adaptations of a much more fundamental substance which itself is constantly renewed. When people undertake an armed struggle or even a political struggle ... *the significance of tradition changes*'. Also in South Africa people's 'consciousness' has changed during the

What I have in mind, is more or less equivalent to what Lemaire (1976) envisaged as the outcome of the interaction between European and other cultures. [19] Since the development of a *tertium* constitutes a rather long term goal, [20] we should in the meantime be at least conscious of the existing communalities and differences, ensure that we really come to understand the differences, and make room in our syllabi for more than one possible approach (see Van Niekerk 1988:49-54). For instance, instead of insisting on teaching the contents of the Bible (as constructed through Western eyes), and drawing from them authoritative principles for faith, teac~ing and life, we should at least allow for the evaluation of practical conduct, as Africans would do.

The proposed syllabus does make room for difference of opinion regarding ecclesiastical doctrine and method of exegesis, and urges teachers to treat differences in such a way 'as to not cause offence' and to create 'room to accomodate a variety of acceptable viewpoints', but seems to be unaware that there are more fundamental differences to be accomodated.

If we really want to create room for a variety of viewpoints and if we really do not want to 'cause offence,' the construction of syllabi and the compilation of text books should become a joint exercise and not be based exclusively on Western epistemology and hermeneutic and white experience.

Finally, if we should neither impose Western epistemological presuppositions on African people, nor impose African presuppositions on Westerners we shall have to adopt a different approach to Biblical Studies. Instead of concentrating on the detailed contents of the Bible we should rather focus on problem areas in our day to day living, and help pupils inculcate biblical examples in their creative moral decision making.

This means that we should switch from an informative and normative to a problem orientated educational strategy. I mention only two examples.

(1) Once *apartheid* has been removed completely South African pupils will face a really common future. In order to enable them to take morally defensible decisions regarding this shared future they will have to come to grips with the morality of their own histories. The different conceptions of those histories will have to be discussed. The Old Testament provides us with practical examples of believers who found it

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struggle for and against *apartheid*.Once black and white views come into direct contact in the post-*apartheid* situation, that historical situation will once again change black ánd white consciousness.

19. For a summary of and elaboration on Lemaire's ideas, see Van Niekerk (1988:32-34,38-40).

20. This 'plea' to give ourselves 'time' may be misconstrued. Fabian (1983:146) comments on the classical liberal idea that 'primitive' peoples must be given 'time' to overcome the deficiencies of their culture. In this case the category of time creates distance. My plea has nothing in common with this idea. I specifically reject the idea of putting up 'Western' culture as the criterion, and argue for the acceptance of the equality, coevalness and nearness of differing South African cultures, from which, I am sure, something new will emerge - just as *homo sapiens* itself had emerged from this country in the mythological past.

necessary to look back on their history (e g the Deuteronomistic history). The Old Testament also provides us with various retrospections on the same history (e g the Deuteronomist and the Chronist, various 'historical' psalms). Such retrospections may serve as a starting point for creative discussions about our own past.

(2) South Africa is, on the one hand, heading for a 'soft explosion' in terms of population growth (Van Eeden 1987) threatening our quality of life. This problem can be addressed through economic development, industrialisation and urbanisation, which may ensure a better quality of life for every person. But these developmental strategies bring with them problems of their own, such as pollution (Toerien 1987; Le Roux 1987; Boegman & Els 1987 and exploitation. [21] How are the children of today going to make moral decisions on these matters (Nürnberger 1987)? Even if they knew everything about biblical history and are versed in all the methods of exegesis and problems of introduction, they would still be ill-equiped to live as responsible Christians in South Africa, and therefore remain 'below-standard.'

To be sure, one has to be able to count from one to ten in order to do arithmetic, that is, one has to be acquainted with the 'story' of the Bible in order to use it in moral decision making. But then the way in which the biblical story is related becomes of primary importance. I cannot possibly go into any detail of subject didactics here. I would, however, like to suggest that planners take a good look at the National Education Crisis Committee's (1987) method of teaching history, in which group discussions play a very important part. Using that didactic approach will enable students to aquire knowledge of the biblical story and, at the same time, a method for using the Bible in making decisions.

Such an approach will enable different histories, hermeneutical and epistemologies to interact critically, and will enable children to experience not only their prescribed material, but also the birth of a *tertium*, which we need so badly.

5. Conclusion

What I have said is very sketchy and general, and merely draws broad outlines. Many problems remain and many are as yet unknown. I am more than aware of the superficiality of my own presentation and solution, and that much work still has to be done if we really want to present Biblical Studies in a way relevant for South African citizens. My intention merely was to put a matter on the table which has to be addressed urgently if we would like to see Biblical Studies serve a new South Africa.

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21. See, in this regard, Swanepoel (1990), where the 8th-century BC problem of exploitation resulting from economic development and urbanisation and the reaction of the prophet Amos to these circumstances are discussed.

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