

## INTRODUCING A RESEARCH PROJECT ON CONTEXTUAL HERMENEUTICS

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### Abstract

*Because of the variety of discourses in progress in the South African context and because of the plurality of hermeneutical approaches to biblical texts, there is an urgent need for systematic research on basic aspects of a contextual hermeneutics. Some of the priorities in this regard are discussed and details are given of a research project initiated by the Centre for Contextual Hermeneutics to address these issues.*

### 1. The situation

The need for more systematic research on contextual hermeneutics in the present South African situation arises out of two different, but related developments.

On the one hand, contemporary South African society is characterized by an amazingly wide spectrum of discourses taking place simultaneously on different levels in this society. It has become a truism to talk of a society in transition, but it is seldom fully realized how complex the different dialogues are and how they impinge on each other. To list just a few of these debates:

- The secular/sacred debate
- The scientist/fundamentalist debate
- The capitalist/socialist debate
- The democratic/autocratic debate
- The inclusive/exclusive debate
- The East/West debate
- The North/South debate
- The liberationalist/establishment debate
- The pietist/activist debate
- The mass/elitist debate

- The violence/non-violence debate
- The sexist/emancipatory debate
- The alternative/standard debate
- The poverty/wealth debate
- The oppressed/oppressor debate
- The charterist/BC debate
- The African/mainline churches debate
- The prophetic/state/church theology debate
- The Marxist/Christian debate
- The modern/postmodern debate

These debates are indicative of different contexts. The way in which they are isolated and intertwined at the same time, represents both the tragic and the fascinating aspect of South African society. They reflect the potential for destructive conflict, but also contain the seeds for restructuring and reconciliation. Often they overlap - for example, a capitalist and a socialist economy is conceivable in both an autocratic and a democratic political system. In an earlier period, it was possible to keep these contexts and the worlds they represent artificially apart, but now the reality of plurality and of a variety of interpretative communities is asserting itself with increasing urgency.

On the other hand, the phenomenon of plurality has become visible on a different level - that of the methodology of interpretation and more specifically, the exegesis of biblical texts. We are witnessing a swing to pragmatics, where developments like speech act theory, sociological exegesis, materialistic interpretation, reception theory, liberation theology, feminist theology, the ethics of interpretation and many more, present a fundamental challenge to current methods of biblical interpretation. What is at stake is not only the phenomenon of plurality regarding the method of interpretation, but also the recognition of both the undeniable methodological significance of the context of the interpreter and the community of which he or she forms part.

## **2. The problem**

The convergence of the two streams outlined above - the plurality of experience and existence in the South African context and the plurality of hermeneutical methods - has aggravated the problem of interpretation on the level of both practice and theory.

In practice, the average reader of the Bible who has been steeped in the tradition of the authority of Scripture, experiences the plurality of meaning as a contradiction of the way in which he or she expects Scripture to function. This reader has not been prepared for the possibility of multiple meaning and the influence of the context in

producing meaning. This is especially frustrating in a situation where the biblical text is often the only common link between readers that is expected to function as the basis for understanding and mediation, but in practice becomes the cause of division.

On the theoretical level, existing hermeneutical frameworks are deficient in two major respects. Most current theological theories of interpretation have their conceptual apparatus and philosophical roots in the European tradition, rendering them unable to handle the complexity of the different discourses. At the same time, these approaches do not provide adequately for the pragmatic implications of interpretation. They stop at the need for explanation, without considering the persuasive aspects of the process of understanding. Because they do not give account of the power dimension, they are unable to explain and inform the pragmatic need for contextualisation, nor do they consider the ethics of interpretation.

These are some of the factors which gave rise to a skepticism regarding the European hermeneutical tradition and its ability to provide the basis for an effective hermeneutics in a Third World context. Developments in theological reflection in North America, Latin America and more recently in Africa has deepened this skepticism which has even led to sharp differences even between exponents of Black Theology, and to the accusation that Black Theology has not taken its own criticism of White Theology seriously enough.

The result is confusion in the mind of the student, who cannot relate his or her formal training in hermeneutics to the pragmatic needs of the situation. At the same time, the epistemological relationship between experience and thought, between text and application remains unclear, making it impossible to inform and guide the process of interpretation.

### **3. The challenge**

These developments present a challenge to the interpreter of biblical material that cannot be avoided any longer.

First of all, a clearer understanding of the term 'context' and 'contextualisation' is needed. It is ironic that it is developments outside theology that are revitalizing many of the classical debates inside theology. Concepts like *Sitz im Leben*, the historicity of existence and of biblical texts, demythologising and many others have regained their importance and have developed new dimensions. The movement is from the present to the past, and not *vice versa*, which often has been the normal sequence. Newer insights regarding the situation of the reception of texts have led to a clearer understanding of the situation of their production. The recognition of the role of interpretative communities resulted in a re-appraisal of ancient interpretative traditions and the societies that generated them. Plurality of meaning is understood by some as the plurality of reception. In this way, theological and hermeneutical issues are being informed by developments in literary and social theory.

The emphasis on the contemporary reader necessitates a reconsideration of the original reader. For the interpretation of biblical material, at least three different

contexts or 'worlds' are of importance: the world of the author, of the text and of the reader.

Secondly, the nature and status of the text need to be redefined. If the text is not a static entity, but itself the result of a dynamic interchange between (original) author and (first) reader, it could be argued that the text is per definition the product of contextualization. Reception theory has further made it clear that any statement regarding the text or based on the text is reader mediated, that is, depends on a prior reading of the text. In this sense, the stability of the text is qualified, best conceded in the face of deconstructionist critique in order to get to the further issue of the textuality inherent in all communication. This should be the focus of the debate on the relationship between text and context and the relationship between experience and thought, between language and reality. Related issues that are also in need of further clarification concern the question of continuity in pluriform interpretations and the possibility of dialogue between different interpretative communities.

Thirdly, the relationship between power and interpretation, between rhetorics and hermeneutics needs attention, which means that the ethics of interpretation inevitably becomes an issue in contextual hermeneutics.

Fourthly, the contrast between the critic and the ordinary reader has implications not only for the level at which a specific interpretation takes place, but also for the question whose interests are at stake. From the perspective of methodology, it concerns the choice between an approach from below or from above, and also the relationship between praxis and the reflection on praxis.

Fifthly, empirical research on the different interpretive communities in South Africa is sorely needed. Promising work is already being done on the reading, the teaching and the preaching of biblical texts in different groups and in different theological traditions, but much more information is needed to form a more complete picture of the present state of affairs. More variables appear to influence the situation than what is normally assumed.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Researchers of contextual issues in the South African setting face a daunting task. It is not easy to get a grip on the complexity and the dynamic nature of the situation with its rapid changes. At the same time, two important advantages should be kept in mind.

Firstly, because of its cultural heritage and its location in Africa, South African theologians are in a position to draw from a variety of intellectual and theological traditions. Both in terms of language and history they have direct access to the hermeneutical tradition of Europe. At the same time, they are open to the North American social tradition and its interest in the interaction between culture and religion. The emergence of black theology here and of liberation theology in Latin America have deeply influenced developments in South Africa. But it is the context of Africa that lends a different dimension to all these influences, and which might

still be the most important factor in the future development of a local contextual hermeneutics. The dynamic interchange between these various traditions and the ferment it is causing is already noticeable in the intense debate on the suitability of Western methodological approaches for the development of a truly contextual hermeneutic to meet the needs of the African situation.

Secondly, theologians in the South African context have the great advantage of working in a pragmatic environment. This laboratory on their doorstep will be envied by many. Not only does it inject a sense of realism to theoretical reflections, but it provides a ready testing ground for whatever methodological alternatives emerge.

In view of these considerations and in order to participate in a process that is already in progress on many different levels, the Centre for Contextual Hermeneutics has decided to initiate a research programme for investigating aspects of an effective theological hermeneutics for the South African context. The project will include both theoretical and pragmatic dimensions and the aim would be to develop a hermeneutical approach capable to communicate the essentials of the Christian faith in a specified context. A small task force has already started preliminary work, and the following three articles in this volume were discussed at the first meeting of the group in September 1989 in Stellenbosch. The project has been planned for a five year period, and we hope to keep readers of *Scriptura* informed of its progress.