

GOD IN CONTEXT: THE SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION OF A RELIGIOUS UNIVERSE IN A BASE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY¹

James R Cochrane

'We have depended,' says Teresa Okure, 'either on expatriates ... or on African men to speak for us theologically and otherwise. Has the time now come to speak for ourselves?'² Okure's question is asked as an African woman, but in South Africa at least, it can also be asked for marginalized and oppressed black groups as a whole. The concern of this essay is to reflect on the speaking of a small base Christian community in a large informal peri-urban settlement, similar to the *favellas* of Latin America, outside the Durban metropolitan area. The first step is 'listening to' what they have to say.³

This base Christian community has met for some four years over a weekly bible study. During this time, the confidence of the members grew strong that they had something to say about their own lives, as did their conviction that what they had to say has wider significance. Thus the second concern of this essay, which may also be expressed via the words of Teresa Okure: 'Having arisen from the sleep of silence, will we now let others determine how we should speak and do theology? Or will we find our own way of doing theology?' It is at this point that my own location in the wider Church and my

-
1. The financial assistance of the Centre for Science Development, previously the Human Sciences Research Council, towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this paper and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the Centre for Science Development.
 2. Okure T, 'Reflection on Luke 8:40-56', in Oduyoye, MA & Kanyoro, MRA *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*, 226. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
 3. I am indebted to the work and assistance of Graham Philpott for much of the material upon which I reflect. His own studies in the same context, done under my supervision and focused on the New Testament image of the kin-dom (the concept is neither feudal or sexist, and is taken over from a Mexican, feminist theologian) of God, are of great importance as an exemplary model of work in a local base Christian community: see Philpott, G 1993. *Jesus is Tricky and God is Undemocratic*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.

own training as a theologian enter into the question, for now I will be 'speaking with' the base Christian community of Amawoti, and in doing so, their speaking may enter into the wider dialogue of the Church universal.⁴

One of the most intractable difficulties for many Christians in trying to understand the possible role of local theologies in the shaping of Christian truth or doctrine is the status of popular religion.⁵ This concern is often stated as the question: Can context ever be normative for tradition in a religion which begins with a claim about a prior, universally normative revelation as the standard of all truth?

The answer of all orthodox respondents to this question is an unequivocal 'no!'. Context can never be normative for Christian truth. I will argue differently, drawing on what I have learned from the base Christian community in Amawoti. But in order to make my argument as clear as possible, I propose to pursue the discussion by clarifying first, the theological problem of popular religion as I believe it has been most acutely addressed in our century, and that is by Karl Barth.

1. The theological problem: is popular religion dogmatically reliable?

Perhaps Barth's time has gone. Moreover, though his work has been widely taught for decades in South Africa, its overall impact on a divided land has tended to be conservative rather than liberatory.⁶ But at the turn of the century many of the issues with which he struggled are not yet resolved.

One of the most central concerned the question of an objective ground for the revelation of God which could neither be reduced to a cultural or political moment, nor fall prey to Feuerbach's penetrating critique of all ideals of God as mere representations of human desire. Barth's passion to break with theologies which either uncritically blessed cultural values or found use for God only in legitimating particular desires remains a clear and strong warning against popular religion. It is the problem of popular religion which concerns us in this essay.

4. I have already begun this task elsewhere in the field of Christology in a paper entitled 'Christ from Above, Jesus from Below', forthcoming, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*.

5. By 'local theologies', I mean the thinking about their faith of ordinary, theologically untrained Christians, which may be likened to folk wisdom. By 'popular religion' I mean the religious experiences and practices--visions, dreams, rituals, moral codes, personal convictions, relational patterns, and organizational operations--which express for ordinary Christians their encounter with the sacred. 'Local theologies' and 'popular religion' may or may not draw upon orthodox theology and faith, and if they do, it will be to varying degrees.

6. The strongest attempts in South Africa to present an alternative, more radical view of Barth, the 'theologian of permanent revolution', are to be found in Villa-Vicencio, C (ed.) 1988. *On Reading Karl Barth in South Africa*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans.

Barth's various attempts to answer this problem may not be adequate to theology in our time, but his struggle to find an answer still provides us with some of the most significant insights we may draw upon in the Christian tradition. Among them is his mature belief that the positive content of revelation can only be found in God's action in *history*, rather than in human action, and that the decisive source of our knowledge of God's action lies in the historical incarnation of Godself in Jesus Christ.

For this reason, his critique of liberal theology turns, among other things, on a conviction that liberal theology had abandoned the essential meaning of the resurrection—that it concerns the body, the physical material reality of human being—for a truncated subjectivism, viz. an emphasis on the moral life and the internal locus of faith. This is explicit in his 1926 essay introducing Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*.⁷

Feuerbach has had and still has, secretly, a head start over modern theology ... in the fact that all his solutions or reinterpretations of Christian theology ... derive from one point where he has the old, and even the oldest, tradition on his side. I speak of his resolute antispiritualism ... or, positively, of his anthropological realism. ... He is concerned with the whole reality (heart and stomach) of man. It is only when one is thus concerned that one can in truth speak of God.

The true God, then, is not the human construction of religion, which expresses desire and projects this desire into a divine realm (Feuerbach's critique of bourgeois Christianity). Accordingly, the true God forbids an identification with God of any cultural, political or philosophical experience or claim.

But this does not mean that there are *no* cultural, political or philosophical claims upon us. The other side of the coin is that the positive action in history of God which we recognize in Jesus Christ requires of us an analogously responsible action in the world. This action has cultural, political and philosophical weight, though only penultimately or provisionally, a point stressed by Bonhoeffer.⁸

2. The difficulty of culture and politics in theology

The issue Barth raised, and answered in this way, is still with us. In particular, all attempts by liberation theologians to ground their understanding of the revelation of the gospel via theories derived from Marx and related figures, or more recently via popular religion, are prey to the criticism that the content of revelation has been reduced to the cultural or political

7. Barth, K 1957 (reprint). Introduction, in Feuerbach, L *The Essence of Christianity*, xxiv. N.Y.: Harper & Row.

8. Bonhoeffer, D 1955. *Ethics*, N.Y.: MacMillan.

experience of human beings, thereby delegitimizing the specifically theological claims of liberation theology.

The projections and cultural-political identifications may not be those of classical, bourgeois liberal theology, for they do not repeat its subjectivist mistakes, but the method is the same. And what Barth attacked, drawing on Kant, Feuerbach, Kierkegaard and later Anselm, was not just the content but the method of the liberal theologians. This point becomes pertinent in my consideration of the religious life and world-view of the base Christian community of Amawoti.

Is it possible to give full weight to *their* understanding of the meaning and the content of the Christian faith without falling prey to a culturally and politically determined view on revelation, which thereby loses its force in the sands of relational relativism? Can they be said to know anything of God's action in the world if this action is first understood via their experience rather than derived Christologically?

Is their symbolic construction of a religious universe a mere Feuerbachian projection, capable of being emptied of mystery by a sociology of religion analysis alone? Or is there some force to their religious claims beyond their limited, human context? Do their religious claims represent reality itself in some way analogous to Barth's understanding of the objective content of revelation in God's action in history? In other words, can their experiences of God be taken to be a source of insight on reality itself, something which goes beyond the limits of a particular context to address all contexts?

Barth would say (and did) that their experience only has objective reality vis-à-vis God's action in the world insofar as it is analogously consistent with what the biblical witness presents as the nature of God's action in the world, that is, with Jesus Christ. While Barth tried in this way to positively ground his understanding of revelation in history (against those who grounded it in subjectivity: in ideals, or in heaven), theological hermeneutics since his time has made it clearer that the biblical text itself is far from neutral. There is no interpretation of the text free of interpretive interests. Indeed, there is no original text which is not already an expression of particular interpretive interests.

This applies to Christology as much as to anything else. The question of just what kind of action God undertook in Jesus Christ remains a matter of judgement. Barth sensed this, and for this reason located judgement in the Christian community, that is, the Church universal, accepting that any particular judgement would be limited by time and place.

3. The hermeneutic approach

Given that the research which this essay represents in part focuses directly on popular religion, with an interest in determining the potential contribution of popular religion to theological truths or doctrines, the problem posed by

Barth must be addressed. My attempt to meet the problem takes the avenue of a controlled set of hermeneutic or interpretive strategies. These strategies include:

- (1) *a recognition of the inherited tradition*, without which a base Christian community would not exist in the first place;
- (2) *a restriction on the normative significance of this tradition*, on the grounds that it is already an interpretation governed by interpretive interests external to this particular base Christian community;
- (3) *an acceptance of the genuine experience of faith among members of the base Christian community*, and therefore a willingness to grant that their reflections on faith in their daily life (*fides quarens intellectum*) are as theological as those of a Barth or anyone similar, though they may be unsystematic and relatively unaware of the wider theological universe within which they are located;
- (4) *a phenomenological method for uncovering the content of this faith and its theological constructs* which begins with the categories of the members of the base Christian community rather than with categories imposed from outside, that is, an attitude of 'listening to' the community;
- (5) *an interrogation of these categories* from the point of the view of the trained person in an attitude of 'speaking with' rather than 'speaking to' or 'speaking for', in order to locate the dialogue about faith within the community in a critical correlation with the dialogue which the external, trained interrogator represents via his or her exposure to the wider theological universe.

Although I cast these strategies in the terms of hermeneutics, they may easily be recast in terms of a sociological or anthropological approach to the study of a religious phenomenon. In this sense, I do not distinguish between theological and non-theological approaches to the investigation of the religious universe of this base Christian community. Put differently, I adopt a deliberately interdisciplinary approach, utilizing the canons of the human sciences on the one level, but doing so only by paying proper attention to the internally defined nature of the phenomenon I am trying to understand on another level. In anthropological terms, I adopt an *emic* approach insofar as I pay attention in the first place to the words and categories of the base Christian community, while my own subsequent second-order reflections are *etic* in nature.

4. God in context: the interpretative world of Amawoti

The material upon which the following analysis is based derives exclusively from the gospels of Luke and Matthew, and focuses almost entirely on the ministry and teaching of Jesus as represented in these gospels. Thus the range of texts is limited in several ways. The 'canon within the canon' which these

texts represent is small; both gospels share common original oral and textual ('Q') traditions; Jesus is the focus, and not the Holy Spirit, the disciples, Yahweh, the church, and the like. The texts were chosen by one facilitator in the main. The results obtained from this analysis must be viewed in this perspective.

On the other hand, the studies took place over almost four years; the method of pursuing group discussions was strongly open-ended and, over time, increasingly under control of the group rather than the facilitator; and the group itself indicated a prime interest in Jesus and the gospels rather than other New Testament, or Old Testament texts. Present in the bible studies which I analyse, therefore, is duration, and consequently, a developmental dynamic. Also present is a consistent exploration of the meaning of the Christian core narratives for life in Amawoti. This makes the studies valuable for determining some of the ways in which a religious world view emerges in context, using a text.

An important qualification needs to be noted, though I will not pursue it in depth here. Texts are already a deposit of tradition, and thus they carry an authority of their own which oral tradition does not. Once an oral tradition is recorded, it offers power to those who control the resultant text. Indeed, the creation of the text is already the product of a particular power relation. As Draper, quoting Catherine Bell, notes, 'In general, such textual codification involves a shift from the authority of memory, seniority, and practical expertise ... to the authority of those who control access to and interpretation of the texts.'⁹

In this sense, though the base Christian community of Amawoti do build up their own religious world-view in their prolonged dialogue with the gospels, they are subject to an already deposited world view. This functions as an external source of power which controls their knowledge, before they begin their own constructions. Whereas this cautions us about the originality of anything arising from Amawoti, it also points us to the more positive feature of the power relationship, and that is the power of interpretation in the hands of the base Christian community. In this sense, the results depicted in this essay are the outcome of a provisional, to some extent 'first', struggle between two powers: that contained in the authority of the text, and that contained in the authority of the experiences of the base Christian community. This struggle is not hidden, but becomes conscious to the members of the base Christian community themselves:¹⁰

Xolile comments on a verse very broadly, in a manner that goes well beyond the literal text.

9. Draper, JA 'Social Ambiguity and the Production of Text: Prophets, Teachers, Bishops and Deacons, and the Development of the Jesus Tradition in the Community of the Didache', in Jefford, CN (ed.). *The Didache in Context: Essays on its Text, History and Transmission*. Leiden: Brill; forthcoming.

10. Bible study of 30/6/89, on Luke 9: 57-62.

Lungi: Where does Jesus say that?

Xolile: Between the lines.

Thabo: The Bible is not very straightforward.

Phumzile: Yes, you have to work to get what you want from the Bible (so that it makes sense).

This issue brings us directly to the question of interpretation. What hermeneutic strategies are in fact adopted by the base Christian community in Amawoti, by which their reality and the projected world of the text encounter each other? What is the nature of this encounter, and what are the consequences for the authority of the text vis-à-vis the authority of the group's experiences or context?

Let's begin by taking one exemplary piece of dialogue. The text is Matthew 5: 13-16, following directly on the beatitudes, calling for the disciples to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world.¹¹ The base Christian community begins with the symbol of salt.

Facilitator: What are your uses for salt?

Thabo: To make food tasty, to stop ghosts, to kill ants, snakes and snails, to scare frogs, to stop blood and to stop thieves. You can also put it on the chicken's mouth before you slaughter it.

Lungi: If you throw it on top of the roof it will chase ghosts away: The ghosts start counting the salt and soon the time is finished and they must go back to the graveyard.

Xolile: Salt can also be used to preserve things, like biltong. Salt also helps a dead person not become swollen, because salt absorbs water. Too much salt can cause diabetes and high blood pressure.

group: We take the frogs and snails as the pharisees. If you put too much salt in your food you can't eat it.

The reading of the text takes place

Thabo: God sent us into the world to be like him, he wants us to represent him. We must help others to become salt. Those people who have lost their conscience can be changed, like salt in water.

Nomtheto: Salt is a ghost buster! In our belief, we believe that a Christian can chase a ghost away.

Phumzile: Does a Christian need to risk his life?

Facilitator: Why do you ask?

11. Bible study dated 26/8/89.

Phumzile: You said a Christian must stop bad things, e.g. if you see someone pick pocketing--what do you do? But, please, don't answer like Jesus Christ.

Thabo: Remember, light can be a warning, you can warn the person.

Phumzile: What if the thief will kill you for warning his victim?

Thabo: I will be taking a risk. It's reality.

Facilitator then offers another example: one is asked to give of something one values and the other needs. What would it mean to be salt or light in this context?

Phumzile: That's easy to do. Why do we run away from the word 'killing'? It's said that everyone wants to go to heaven, but they don't want to die. People are afraid of dying. It's useless to go to church and put on a good show, when I know I'm not prepared to stop the pick pocket. And I'm afraid that when I get to heaven, Jesus says I was foolish to do that!

Several hermeneutic issues come to the fore in this dialogue. They include: the role of the facilitator in the interpretive act; the link to a cultural tradition; the interest in a contemporary interpretive context; the role of the ordinary reader in constructing meaning; the polysemy of symbolic language; and the capacity of readers to challenge interpretive authorities (the facilitator in the first instance).

4.1 The role of the facilitator in the interpretive act

The bible study begins with an open-ended question about the significance of salt. The facilitator pre-empts any control by the text over the meaning of the symbol of salt by leaving the reading of the text until after this first question has been explored. In addition, the facilitator undermines any idea that he (in this case) will provide the interpretation he believes to be correct or most appropriate by putting open-ended questions.

This tactic is visible in most of the bible studies analysed, though it is noticeable that the facilitator dominates the interpretive act more in the early stages of the group's life. After about a year of roughly weekly meetings, his readiness to trust the group's interpretive activity grows, and his fears that they will read the text 'heretically' subsides accordingly. Indeed, 'heretical readings' (readings which go significantly beyond the facilitator's inherited range of meanings) are increasingly allowed, while the facilitator's occasional attempts to constrain the possible meanings of a text to those with which he is comfortable become increasingly infrequent.

The facilitator is well trained in theology, having completed advanced postgraduate studies which depended upon his involvement with the base Christian community bible study process, and which include his own

reflections on a participatory research paradigm.¹² Inherent in these bible studies, therefore, is the tension between the trained reader and the untrained reader.¹³

The tension must be maintained if the interpretive acts of a base Christian community are not to succumb to the two common problems of interactive interpretation. If the trained reader dominates (by far the most common occurrence, and the one to be most wary of), then the wisdom of the base Christian community is replaced by the dominating knowledge of the trained reader. Knowledge is power, Foucault reminds us, and that is just what most marks such a relationship. If, on the other hand, the untrained readers are left unchallenged by the knowledge of the trained reader, a common consequence is the reduction of the world of the text to a particular cultural or political tradition. The text then becomes an instrument in another game, while the interpretive relationship is deprived of the criticality and the wisdom of the wider interpretive community (the global Christian community, past and present) which it should be the task of the trained reader to represent.

This last comment betrays an implicit assumption, namely, that the primary role of the trained interpreter (whether facilitating the group or merely a member of it) is to represent the wisdom and accumulated experience of the Christian community. I understand this community to extend both synchronically and diachronically, thus incorporating the inherited tradition of the community. Similarly, theologies past and present I understand to be the reflected expression of faith of this community. My reference to Foucault's connection between power and knowledge indicates a further implicit assumption: No theology, past or present, is free of power relations. A hermeneutic of suspicion thus accompanies the inherently reconstructive hermeneutic I am proposing.

What the Amawoti bible studies demonstrate is (1) the importance of the distinct roles of what we might call the 'organic intellectuals' (Gramsci) and the vital organs of the people, and (2) the need to develop strategies of interaction which promote the tension between the two parties and which embrace the permanent ambiguities of this interaction. This interaction, and the power relation it represents, needs to become an overt aspect of any effective hermeneutic strategy for work with base Christian communities.

4.2. Interpretation and cultural traditions

A contextual hermeneutic necessarily introduces the question of the role of culture in shaping interpretation. The debate about inculturation in Africa is

12. Philpott, G op. cit., chapter two.

13. An extensive discussion of the dialectic between trained and untrained readers, focusing on questions of accountability, solidarity and continuity with tradition, may be found in West, G 1991. *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation*, chapters four, five and eight. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.

well advanced, and most theologians in countries to the north of South Africa regard a theology of inculturation to be their primary goal. The Amawoti bible studies present us with an ambiguous picture in this respect.

On the one hand, contemporary cultural practices are an important part of 'making the bible come alive'. The uses of salt depicted in the dialogue above are simultaneously mundane, rich in African beliefs, and in some cases, the source of new interpretations of the biblical narrative. The new interpretations are instructive: Pharisees, like frogs and snails, are damaged or destroyed by salt; or they have too much salt, that is, 'religion', and thus have made the faith inedible; Christian must be 'ghost busters', an image which connects to more traditional practices of overcoming evil spirits.

Here the interpretive activity goes in two directions, viz. a reinterpretation of the text, and a reinterpretation of traditional culture. The link between text and context is clearly complex and transparent in both directions. Whereas in many African independent churches¹⁴ this is a matter of course, in other churches it is still highly contentious. The evidence of the bible studies of the Amawoti base Christian community suggests that far more readiness to incorporate African idioms, grammars and symbols is appropriate.

On the other hand, the idea that there is either one single African tradition, or that any of the multiple African traditions is static and free of the interplay of complex historical forces, is not sustainable. The Amawoti base Christian community regularly refer to 'traditional' thinking which reflects an altered and altering economic and political landscape. This includes the context of struggle for liberation, of worker struggles, of earlier wars against conquest, and most commonly, of the conditions of a peri-urban informal settlement many of whose inhabitants have close and recent links with rural life as well as industry and commerce. Cultural tradition in this case is a mix of the past and the present, and like a cake, the ingredients cannot be separated from each other very easily. Ambiguity remains, however, particularly in the desire to return to a past which is imagined as still valid:¹⁵

Nomtheto: Jesus is getting more strict than before. We need to feel free. We are a different nation. We need to follow our cultures.

Thabo: But culture has changed.

Xolile: Most blacks would like to go back to the old days.

In general, the Amawoti base Christian community demonstrates in the way in which its members respond to the bible studies that it is not past culture that predominates in the interpretive process but present conditions of life.

14. Black commentators for good reasons have variously suggested other terms than 'independent' to designate these churches, including 'indigenous', 'initiated', and 'instituted'. But none of these terms is widespread and thus readily recognizable, and no consensus exists on them. I thus retain the more familiar term.

15. Bible study of 1/12/89, on Matt 5: 27-30.

Accordingly, the religious world-view which emerges is an attempt at interpreting life as it is and as it is desired. Past cultural inheritances are drawn into this picture as appropriate, and reinterpreted in the process, but they do not dominate, nor is there evidence in the base Christian community of a desire to have it any other way. Expressed sociologically, the material conditions of life in a 'squatter' area establish the primary parameters for the construction of the religious symbolic universe which is felt to be 'real'. This suggests that the incipient theology of a local base Christian community will not distinguish between material and spiritual realities, but will be 'incarnational'.¹⁶

4.3. The contemporary context of interpretation

In the dialogue reproduced above pick pocketers rate a special mention. Stealing, thievery of all kinds, is a common theme in the bible studies of Amawoti. Not only are members of the group and their relatives and friends often depicted as victims, but questions are also raised about the effects of severe poverty in driving one to theft:¹⁷

If a rich person understands it, they will share what they have and support others. If someone pickpockets everyday, what makes him do that? It's because of basic needs not met. It means he doesn't have the power to get a job.

Once again, the interpretive activity of the base Christian community is nuanced and able to accommodate ambiguity. This is most apparent in discussions concerning violence, one of the most depressing and seemingly intractable aspects of their daily experience in Amawoti and surrounding areas. On Luke 4: 16-22 the comment is made that 'Jesus says he will release prisoners, but he cannot release prisoners who have attacked people, like Inkatha vigilantes.'¹⁸ This sense of what is appropriate and what not includes a capacity to see long-term consequences, as is evident in the following dialogue on Matt 5: 38-42:¹⁹

Thabo: In Amawoti its 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. But would the faction fight stop? The followers might carry on organizing fighting, and their relatives if they were killed.

Phumzile: The warlords must be killed.

16. I use the term in the sense of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, accepting the influential and long-standing criticism of Krister Stendahl that western theology since Augustine has psychologized our understanding of the faith; see his seminal essay, 'The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West' in Stendahl, K 1976. *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, Philadelphia: Fortress.

17. Bible study of 23/2/90, on Matt 6: 11.

18. Bible study of 28/10/88.

19. Bible study of 19/1/90.

Bonginkosi: Then what is freedom of speech?

Phumzile: Fighting doesn't solve the problem always, but sometimes. In Amawoti it does.

Lungi: It may in the short term, but not in the long term, it never does. Violence is disastrous, because it multiplies.

The attempt to develop a 'rich' interpretation continues by drawing on another context of violence as an image able to make a different point, in this case, domestic violence:

Phumzile: What if a wife is being beaten by her husband? Must she come back for more?

Thabo: Doesn't it say something else than this? This is practically impossible. Maybe he [Jesus] is trying to say that if we want to live in harmony, we don't have to take revenge. It's actually about an enlightened way of acting.

The 'enlightened way of acting' includes a broad vision of society, a vision which overcomes the divisions and hatreds of the past, though not without a critical assessment of the realities of the contemporary context.²⁰ Though several bible studies over the years during which the group met provide a similar picture, one further example, a reflection on the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37) nicely makes this point:²¹

A Zulu person has been injured on the road. Gatsha goes past, and so does the induna. So does a councillor. Then it is a Pondo who comes and helps the man and gives him what he needs. The neighbour is the one who does a favour.

The contemporary context functions hermeneutically in several ways. First, it enables understanding of an ancient text, though the nature of this understanding still needs to be explored. Second, it locates the text in relation to a known life situation and thereby allows the projected world of the text to speak to the reader or contemporary interpreter. Third, it allows the members of the base Christian community to appropriate the text for themselves, that is, to establish power over it. Fourth, this means that the base Christian community are less inclined to cede their right to interpret their world to some external authority. Naturally, many thorny issues are raised by these factors, some of which will be addressed below.

20. Not surprisingly, there are moments in which questions of providence also raise their head, as in the following dialogue:

Lungi: They say Jesus is everywhere. *Facilitator*: But what is he doing here?
Bonginkosi: Crying to God to stop this. *Phumzile*: But somehow the violence was good, and people dying helped a lot. I wouldn't like it to happen to me, but somehow it was good. There was a balance. Control used to be with the councillors, indunas, etc., now the community has control. (From Bible study of 11/5/90, on Matt 27: 57-28).

21. Bible study of 12/12/88.

4.4. Importance of the ordinary reader in constructing meaning

What kind of understanding of the ancient text arises via the processes described above? That 'understanding' is important to the base Christian community is made explicit: 'By studying the Bible we come to understand, like taking away our blindness.'²² It is important to note that almost all of the members of the base Christian community at Amawoti were neither regular churchgoers of any kind, nor familiar with the texts they were reading (though some of the narratives were known to them via oral transmission). Most of them worked in, or assisted, a primary health care project, and not a church organization.

One of the remarkable aspects of the story of this base Christian community is the manner in which their weekly bible studies, over time, provided the leverage for a measure of conscientization. Unlike those for whom Paulo Frere wrote in Brazil--people trapped in fatalism with a low level of political awareness--the Amawoti base Christian community members are by a large steeped in anti-apartheid politics, either directly or indirectly. 'Conscientization' in this context means something different.

What the bible studies did is begin to provide an overall framework for reflecting on their multiple levels and spheres of decision-making and experience. As one follows the history of the group over four years, and their ongoing dialogue in the bible study material, one readily discerns a growing capacity to incorporate the complexities and ambiguities of life into an overall picture of reality. Mystery, magic and rationality merge; paradoxes are dealt with by holding their elements in dialectical tension; contradictions are argued through and the ambiguities that remain are accepted as descriptive of reality; personal and public realms of activity and ethical judgment are brought together into a larger framework; a set of symbols and images begins to emerge as constitutive of the 'picture of reality' which the group holds to be 'true'.²³ Following Averil Cameron, I call these 'rhetorical strategies', by which the Christian tradition is able to provide a discourse capable of undergirding a way of life adequate to the intellectual, existential and material conditions of the contemporary world.²⁴

22. Bible study of 28/10/88.

23. I will not duplicate the work done by Philpott in demonstrating this in his study of the kin-dom of God in Amawoti, but for those who wish to see the way in which select symbols and images function to interpret reality, and the way in which a language with categories peculiar to the experiences of the Amawoti base Christian community arises in the process, chapters four and five of his book are invaluable. Note also that 'Truth' in this context is roughly equivalent to 'adequate to actual experience'.

24. Cameron, A 1991. *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: the Development of Christian Discourse*. Berkeley: University of California Press. A lengthier discussion of my application in South Africa of Cameron's understanding of rhetorical strategies in Christian discourse practices may be found in 'War, Remembrance, and Reconstruction', co-authored with West, G 1993. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 84, September, 25-40.

Yet the text does not simply provide the world-view which the group then adopts. The evidence of the bible studies, some of which has already been discussed, manifestly points in the direction mapped by Paul Ricoeur: whereas the text reflects its own world on the one hand (the focus of historical-critical studies), and whereas it constrains the range of possible meanings through its semantic structure on the other, it also opens up worlds. In Ricoeur's terms, the text is polysemic (having multiple meanings), and any one meaning is the result of an interaction between the text and the reader who, in the act of interpretation, reduces the polysemy momentarily to monosemy (one meaning). The sense of interpretive activity as creative agency in the world is contained in the repeated reduction of the polysemy of the text to monosemy, and the incorporation of the resultant, particular interpretation into the range of meanings (or polysemy) of the text. As Croatto puts it:²⁵

When ... the Bible is read from out of socio-cultural reality-political, economic, cultural, religious and the like, it reveals dimensions not previously seen, helped by beams of light not captured in earlier readings. What is unsaid in what a text 'says' is said in a contextualized interpretation.

From one point of view, this entire essay is an argument to allow this process its freedom in the local context. This means that the members of a base Christian community such as the one in Amawoti must be allowed to speak, and they must be allowed to speak freely. The simplest and first criterion of 'speaking freely' is that other interpretative interests are placed in the background until such time as the dialogue with the text in context has become rich enough and confident enough to overcome the tendency of all authoritative interpretations to foreclose new interpretations.

4.5. Critical challenges from the ordinary reader

Where this happens, it is clear that authoritative readings are challenged by the members of the base Christian community, and that these challenges are not only legitimate contextually (they arise from genuine needs and experiences) but also dogmatically (they are often matched by similar, acknowledged challenges appearing throughout the history of the Christian tradition). Some examples will indicate the way in which this happens.

I have already referred to the tendency of western theology to psychologize faith, a tendency which easily leads in a liberal capitalist society with its strong individualist ethic and secularist character to a spiritualizing of the gospel. The Amawoti base Christian community find spiritualized approaches

25. See Croatto, JS 1987. *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning*, 69. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis. Croatto's influential little work on biblical hermeneutics in the Latin American context adopts a position not far from the one I advocate here. As he also depends upon Ricoeur to a large extent, this is not surprising.

to faith alien (on reading Matt 13: 44-52, the parables of the hidden treasure, the pearl and the net):²⁶

Bonginkosi: It's about development--it tells about something you find and develop, something very important.

Lungi: It means we must give up everything worldly. Can you triumph spiritually if you continue with these worldly things?

Thabo: I don't know what you mean by 'spiritual' things. I'm in this world--that's where I am living, that's where I am. How can I reject it? The parable is talking about preparing our lives and being prepared to do something. But heaven is something we don't know about, we're not sure of and its not in this world.

Similar sentiments are repeatedly expressed, perhaps most poignantly by one of the group members who commented on the Matt 6:11 ('give us this day our daily bread') that this refers to '... basic needs. He wants us to have them; pray for basic needs, then we can go to church and praise him because our stomach will be full and we can concentrate.'²⁷ This hope for the fulfillment of basic needs, and for social needs such as justice, as evidenced in many of the bible studies, is not simply a forlorn cry. It is accompanied by a recognition of the demand to act in accordance with the desired goals. The claim articulated by Jürgen Moltmann in some of his earlier works that hope becomes concrete in anticipatory planning for the future,²⁸ finds ready support in the concern of the base Christian community for the material conditions of their lives:²⁹

Phumzile: Wisdom means knowing and thinking about other people, because we know God, and it means planning ahead, like an ant who works hard in summer to collect its food, then in winter it doesn't have to go out.

Thabo: To be wise, you need to have a foundation, otherwise you can sink. But it also depends on how you build onto that foundation. As the house goes up, the builders may lose their start, so the structure is poor. The inspector will see that the foundation is OK, but the building is not.

Xolile: I think this is very relevant. After we've made the foundation--that is God--planning is part of wisdom. We need to plan continuously, each part of wisdom, or we will go astray.

laughter: I'm laughing because this office doesn't even have a foundation.

The critical capacities of the base Christian community, born of their context and strengthened by their dialogue with the texts of the Bible, are substantial.

26. Bible study of 21/7/89.

27. Bible study of 23/2/90.

28. Moltmann, J 1971. *Hope and Planning*, London: SCM.

29. Bible study of 18/9/89, on Matt 7: 24-29.

The method promoted in this essay will put facilitators, particularly those who see themselves as trained theologically, in a difficult position if they are easily threatened by such critical activity.

The members of the base Christian community are acutely aware of this; in fact, they believe they are engaged in an interpretative activity which most clergy they know would not be able to cope with. What they experience instead, on the part of clergy, is a retreat into precisely the kind of dominating practice which they will no longer accept. This is not the place to explore the ecclesiology which results, though it will be done in a separate study. But it is worth indicating something of the 'picture of reality' of the Amawoti base Christian community in this respect. Not surprisingly, the texts they have read provide the appropriate category for expressing their critique and their concern: the pharisees.

The pharisees today are those who have high positions, like Mbubi and Mandlaza....³⁰ It's the way church ministry is carried out - they concentrate on the Bible and not on the community. They only preach in a church hall. Most ministers drive around in cars - they never walk, so they never get to know the people. They hide away from them. They should be involved in the community. It's wrong! To intimidate people with the Bible is not treating it as the Word of God.³¹ They don't touch people, they point with their sticks!³²

That the base Christian community is quite capable of self-criticism, particularly in applying the same principles to themselves by which they assess others, is also evident in the same semantic context:

What makes God happy? I think we need to search ourselves about the work we do in the community. Do the community see us as the pharisee or the tax-collector? Are we disrespected, like the pharisee?³³

Or, in another context, reflecting on Matt 7: 24-29 (build on rock, not sand):

Thabo: Jesus has been explaining how to live, now this is a summary: we know what to do, building a strong house. The whole community knows about peace, protests about police and warlords. People are united in looking for a new South Africa. We are all the same in the end.

Xolile: We need to take the plank out of our own eye, we can't judge Inkatha.

Lungi: Only God can.

30. Bible study of 5/5/89, on Luke 18: 9-14.

31. Bible study of 11/11/88, on Luke 17: 20-21.

32. Bible study of 28/7/89, on Luke 11: 42-43 (1st of six woes).

33. Bible study of 5/5/89, on Luke 18: 9-14.

4.6. Conclusion

The construction of a religious world-view adequate to the contemporary context of the Amawoti base Christian community in all of its multiple facets (economy, political life, community, family, culture, and personal existence), and capable of offering hope for redemption from the suffering and deprivations of that context, is a long, painstaking process of dialogue and interpretation. It is a journey of discovery even as it is a test of the intellectual and emotional integrity of each of the members of the base Christian community. In its very essence, at least in this context, it is a communal activity, and it depends for its life upon this fact as much as anything else.

The members of the base Christian community themselves have become overtly aware of this journey and its significance, having begun their march through the many weeks, months and years of bible study with little of the religious socialization that others have who are familiar with the Christian scriptures and schooled in the confessional, liturgical and catechetical traditions of the churches. As the group notes in a bible study meeting some two and a half years after they began, '[we] treat this as if Jesus has been running a workshop about our lives. Now, it's a choice--the shortcut, easy one which will collapse in the end when the rain comes. Or the other one Jesus is telling us.'³⁴

The complexity with which the base Christian community members develop their religious symbolic universe, their awareness of what they are doing, their capacity to incorporate the world projected by the text and to do so self-critically, and their determination to engage in the kind of interpretive activity which, a priori, prevents the alienation of text from context, all contributes to the power of the methods and strategies adopted by the group and its facilitator.

The research which this essay represents encourages the much wider adoption of such methods and strategies within the churches, because it shows clearly that the risks of giving over the power of interpretation, and thereby the production of (theological) knowledge, to base Christian communities well outweigh the benefits. Moreover, the risks appear to be quite within the range of long-accepted processes of reform and renewal within the churches, whether one considers the slogan 'semper reformanda' in the Protestant churches, the influence of Vatican II in the Roman Catholic church, the institutional flexibility of the evangelical churches, or the emphasis on the dynamic role of the Spirit in pentacostal churches.

34. Bible study of 20/7/90.

5. Commitment and collaboration

However, lest what has been said to this point be taken to be sufficient in itself, one further element of the hermeneutic process at work in the Amawoti base Christian community remains to be considered. This is the question of interpretative interests. All real interpreters (as opposed to theoretical ones) have interests, and their interpretative activity is shaped by these interests, whether overtly or not. Moreover, not all interpretive interests are compatible with what I have depicted here.

Underlying the question of interpretative interests, as is quite clear in the case of the base Christian community of Amawoti, is the question of commitment: Whose interests, and which interests, are served by particular kinds and strategies of interpretation? There is a further question: Are there any grounds for choosing between interpretative interests.

This question has been thoroughly discussed by Gerald West in a manner particularly appropriate to the matters addressed by this essay, and I refer to his work here.³⁵ Suffice it to say that I share his conviction that an overtly acknowledged commitment is a central plank of any adequate hermeneutic, and that a biblical hermeneutic implies a particular commitment to those who have been variously described as the 'poor', 'oppressed', 'marginalized', 'victims' of society.

The Amawoti group themselves are quite conscious of this element of their interpretative activity. They depict three categories of God's people: All who are created by God whom God loves; followers of God; and, special groups for whom God came, like the poor and the blind. 'There is a difference between God's followers and the people that Jesus came for. He wanted to *change* their situation. For the poor, it was good news, and the blind were able to see. Jesus describes his mission and shows his followers what their mission is.'³⁶ That the third category is not incidental but central to their soteriological understanding is made equally clear by the base Christian community:³⁷

Facilitator: If Jesus came into Amawoti how would people recognize him as king or leader?

[group] He cares for poor and outcast; leaders feel threatened; he gives poor people hope and challenges leaders.

I would like to develop the point a little further, however, with specific reference to a challenge from Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

The hermeneutic significance of particular contexts lies in the correlation between contemporary interpretations and classic interpretations of the text.

35. West, G op. cit., 56-61.

36. Bible study of 30/8/91, on Isaiah 61:1-2, 35:5-6.

37. Bible study of 3/3/89, on Luke 19: 29-44.

The import of a hermeneutic strategy lies in the basic metaphor underlying interpretive interests, namely, 'conversation'.

My own research interest here lie in the intent to facilitate the entrance into the diachronic and synchronic 'conversation' (theologies) of the Christian community a contribution from the voices of those who are normally marginalized in discourse, and who are thereby dislocated from the centers of power with which any discourse is always linked.³⁸

But, as Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes in a significant convocation address to the Harvard Divinity School,³⁹ it is important to distinguish between the metaphor of 'conversation' underlying the hermeneutic intent, and the metaphor of 'collaboration' which underlies an emphasis on praxis. Because discourses are inevitably plural, it is easy to fall prey to a relativist view in which no particular perspective is privileged above any other. In turn, this must lead to forms of quietism or conservatism, simply because there is no reason or defensible impulse to choose one theology over another. Everything depends upon who you are and where you stand, and all claims can only be weighed pragmatically.

'Collaboration', the metaphor of praxis, drives us away from relativism into making choices which can be defended against other choices. My plea to take into a widely articulated and authoritative indigenous theology the kind of 'incipient theology' seen in the bible studies of Amawoti accompanies a conviction that a commitment to the perspective of this and similar local 'base' communities is the necessary act of collaboration.⁴⁰

This raises serious questions about 'choosing sides'. On what grounds can this be theological defended? Who decides on how the sides are to be defined, and why? What happens to the necessary 'conversation' among all sides which not only a hermeneutic intent, but also a valid view on theology, demands of the Christian community?

Schüssler Fiorenza correctly argues, in my opinion, that a hermeneutic model of conversation, though necessary in order to respect the plurality of experiences and thus the experience of the marginalized Other as well, is insufficient. 'Critical collaboration' is vital because we do not 'all enter the conversation on equal terms'.⁴¹ Interpretation, therefore, must be

38. See Mandew, M 1993. 'Power and Empowerment: Religious Imagination and the Life of a Local Base Community', 36-37, unpublished dissertation, University of Natal.

39. Schüssler Fiorenza, E 1989. 'Commitment and Critical Inquiry', *Harvard Theological Review*, 82, 1, 1.

40. Schüssler Fiorenza, of course, seeks collaboration with other feminists; there is a point at which the two sets of 'partners in collaboration' meet, namely, in being the objects of oppression and marginalization and the subjects of a struggle against domination.

41. - Schüssler Fiorenza, E op. cit., 8.

accompanied by what Schüssler Fiorenza calls a shift to a 'rhetorical genre', a practical model of collaboration.⁴²

Why, in her view, does a rhetorical genre offer a model of collaboration? First, rhetorical practices display a referential moment about something, in our case, a proclamation about who God is in context. Second, they also display a moment of self-implicature by a speaker or actor, in which the intent of the proclamation is linked to the interests of the proclaimer. Third, they also display a persuasive moment of directedness to involve the other: they elicit responses, emotions, interests, judgements, and commitments directed toward a common vision.

The socio-historical location of rhetoric, understood in this way, is the *polis*, the community of citizens, and it requires political choices. In this way, critical enquiry is integrally bound to an overt practical commitment. While this appears to be a radical move, especially if we are further to add that the results of rhetorical practice must impact upon the formulation of doctrine through the wider 'conversation' of the Church, there is in fact no theological knowledge of consequence which is not bound to particular practical choices.

Schüssler Fiorenza argues this point against the contrary view (that there are definitive bodies of knowledge which are not subject to practical choices) by attacking the ideal of pure reason or universal science. It is worth repeating the gist of her argument.

The Enlightenment ideal of pure reason (or an untarnished science) has dominated, and still does, the academic world. It also dominates much of theological orthodoxy insofar as the intellectual guardians of this orthodoxy believe that the traditions they guard or convey to others are fixed bodies of knowledge which simply need new applications for contemporary relevance. Ironically, even where the canons of the university are respected, including the requirement that everything be rationally defended and critically investigated, theologians frequently manage to protect their own favourite orthodoxies against radical criticism or substantial alteration. The professional guilds to which theologians belong play not a small part in maintaining these defenses for the sake of their discipline's credibility among the faithful.

Schüssler Fiorenza points out that three correctives to the Enlightenment ideal of pure reason are already widely accepted.⁴³ They are the aesthetic-romantic corrective ('intuitive imagination over selective abstraction'), the religious-cultural corrective (tradition as 'wisdom and heritage'), and the political-practical corrective (the connection of knowledge to power).

To this she adds a fourth corrective which she believes has emerged more recently in the challenges from dominated groups and peoples. This is the corrective of 'minority discourses' (by minority, I assume she means that the

42. Ibid., 9.

43. Ibid., 5-6.

discourse in question is normally marginalized or suppressed). The essence of this corrective is to assert the importance of the situated, particular self against the Enlightenment notion of the universal, transcendent subject 'whose disembodied voice is reason'. An embodied voice is what she seeks, specifically those voices which represent the colonized Other. They have been shut out and marginalized by the practical effects of Enlightenment universalism which in the end represents really only the voice of the bourgeoisie writ large.

This is not an argument with 'empirical research, analytical scholarship, or critical abstraction itself, but with an uncritical conception of reason, knowledge and scholarship' which hides the rhetorical character of science even as it marginalizes the four correctives to science as 'ideological' and therefore inadmissible. Wherever reason or science does this, however, it defeats its own intellectual ideal, which is critical understanding, as well as the practical ideal of the Enlightenment, which is a just and democratic society.⁴⁴

'Critical collaboration' implies, therefore, that religious authority claims and identity formations, whether found in doctrine, catechisms or scripture, must be investigated to determine to what extent they exhibit 'destructive religious discourses'.⁴⁵ Theological paradigms, including such influential ones as the great Christological creeds, like texts, are not taken to be innocent from the outset. While they cannot be simply discarded without abandoning any claims to Christian faith, theological paradigms must be recognized as containing more than 'cultural-linguistic rules' (Lindbeck) but also actually or potentially contradictory discourses embedded in competing sets of power-relations.

No theological model can do more, therefore, than guide reflection upon the symbolic constructs (narratives, rituals, images, etc.) by which the faith communicates itself through the ages. Received teachings, on this view, are *heuristically* significant then, rather than dogmatically determinant. As David Tracy points out in criticizing Lindbeck's postliberal 'rule-theory' of doctrine,⁴⁶ this does not imply 'a capitulation of traditional religious beliefs to contemporary secular beliefs. Rather, ... any correlation should be, in principle, one of *mutually critical* correlations of an interpretation of the meaning and truth of the tradition and the interpretation of the meaning and truth of the contemporary situation'.

This is the methodological assumption which undergirds my claim that the perspectives presented by the base ecclesial community of Amawoti must be taken with equal seriousness as the received tradition. The dialectical relationship between these two moments of theological reflection becomes a

44. Ibid., 6.

45. Ibid., 9.

46. Tracy, D 1985. 'Lindbeck's New Program for Theology: a Reflection', *Thomist*, 49, 470.

vital clue to a theological hermeneutic which respects the plurality of voices within the Church and, in doing so, gives proper weight not only to voices of the past, or to those whose knowledge in the present represents power over others, but also to those voices who are at this point still marginalized or suppressed.