# 'CONTEXTUALISATION' AS NOMADIC EXISTENCE

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Botha (1991) refers to various approaches to 'contextualisation', some of which proceed from the assumption that Scripture should interpret present situations, while others insist on letting present situations interpret Scripture. In what follows I shall discuss a South African example of each of these approaches (Potgieter 1989 [1] and Mosala 1989 [2]) to show that, since both approaches may for good reasons be viewed as either 'contextual' or 'non-contextual' our (intuitive) definition of 'contextuality' appears to be at the least ambiguous. Discussing the problematic nature of these two approaches I intend to show that

(a) a contingent socio-political framework provides too narrow a basis for a truly contextual theology,

(b) not every theology that is relevant for a particular contingent situation is necessarily contextual,

(c) not every social theory that can explain a situation is suitable for constructing a truly contextual theology for that situation,

and to suggest an approach that could assist us in speaking less vaguely about 'contextual theology'.

## 1. Biblical interpretation 'from above'

P C Potgieter, moderator of the white Dutch Reformed Church, recently wrote a book on Scripture (Potgieter 1989) in which he argued against 'contextualisation' and in favour of 'application' as the correct way of Scriptural interpretation. His argument runs as follows.

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1. In terms of Hesselgrave & Rommen's categorisation, Potgieter's theology could be termed 'orthodox' (see Botha 1991:10-11).

2. A major reason for choosing Mosala's work is that he, contrary to many liberation theologians (see Botha 1991:6) explicitly reflects on questions of hermeneutics and method, so that a discussion with him is easier than with many other contextual theologians. Even though Mosala explicitly rejects the liberal tradition his theology could, in terms of Hesselgrave & Rommen's categorisation, be classified under neo-liberalism.

## 1.1 The divine nature of biblical texts

Through the inspiration by the Holy Spirit, who ensured that the biblical authors understood and represented God's revealed Word correctly, the Bible presents us with the 'fixed form' of God's infallible Word. [3] It is this fixed form that preserves the Word of God in all purity (Potgieter 1989:15-24). [4] The biblical authors did not 'experience' the word of God - in which case their writings would reflect a subjective element - but received it (Potgieter 1989:34). The fact that ordinary human beings wrote the Bible did, therefore, not lead to a Bible bound to those times and cultures ('tydgebonde/kultuurgebonde'). At most one could say that the product of inspiration was time and culture oriented ('tydbetrokke/kultuurbetrokke') (Potgieter 1989:26). The truth contained in the Bible is thus not (subjective and relative) 'relational truth' but authoritative, objective truth (Potgieter 1989:5-13,17,28,35,38,50,51,57).

## 1.2 The procedures for objective interpretation

Just as the Holy Spirit inspired the biblical authors to write down the pure Word of God (Potgieter 1989:26), he illuminates readers to establish the authoritative divine truth (Potgieter 1989:28), provided that the Bible is interpreted correctly (Potgieter 1989:28). To ensure objective interpretation:

(a) we have to deduce exegetical rules from Scripture itself (Potgieter 1989:32, 33), and

(b) never sever the Bible from the 'sound dogmatic basis' (Potgieter 1989:57) of the 'interpreting church' (Potgieter 1989:53).

Since only proclamation that emanates from a correct *explicatio* of Scripture followed by its application to present-day situations (Potgieter 1989:56-57) can be called 'the Word of God' (Potgieter 1989:36-38), 'contextual theology', which proceeds from present-day societal problems cannot lay such a claim (Potgieter 1989:45-46).

## 1.3 Discussion

Potgieter's effort to secure an infallible, objective authority for theology, and which makes him run into all sorts of philosophical and logical troubles

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3. Consider also Heyns (1958:9-10): 'In die godsdienswetenskap is op goeie gronde onderskeid gemaak tussen die primitiewe godsdienste en die boekgodsdienste ... Hieruit is dit duidelik dat die *boek* 'n wesenlike faktor in enige geestesbeweging is ... omdat dit (die boek) die versameling is van die *woorde*, en woorde is die beliggaming van die *gedagte* ... [D]ie boek is die inkarnasie van die gees en die gees is die stimulus vir die lewe ... Was die Christelike geloof ... nie steeds *geloof in die Bybel nie*, sou ... die oorlewering heel spoedig in mitologie ontaard waarin waarheid en verdigsel nie van mekaar onderskei sou kon word nie ': a conviction still present in Heyns's (1987:19-20) conception of revelation.

4. Consider also (Heyns 1958:10): 'In die Bybel gaan dit wel om *geskiedenis*, want die *openbaringsfeite* van dáár en tóé is opgeteken, maar dit word tog tot boodskap híér en nóú wanneer die Heilige Gees die Skrifwoord oor die openbarings*feit* gebruik en hanteer as *openbaringsfeit*'.

(Deist 1991b), may seem like a text-book example of non-contextual theology. However, his definition of 'authority' [5] is typical of

(a) anti-revolutionary, authoritarian, Kuyperian [6] and

(b) socio-politically conservative fundamentalist [7] political and cultural values. [8]

Thus, even though Potgieter cuts off the Bible from its socio-political roots and believes that it could be interpreted in a cultural and political vacuum, his approach may be seen as 'contextual', [9] because the way he views and handles the Bible echoes and (therefore) serves his political needs. [10] But, as I shall argue later, 'serving relevant political needs' does not seem to me to be a valid criterion for evaluating the contextuality of a theology.

## 2. Biblical interpretation 'from below'

In evaluating the contextuality of Mosala's biblical hermeneutics one has to keep in mind that

(a) he explicitly distances himself from the concept of 'contextualisation' or 'application' (Mosala 1989:16,19,22), and

(b) he sets out to construct a biblical hermeneutic that would be appropriate for liberation theology.

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5. All authority implies a relationship between a superior and an inferior partner (Potgieter 1989:7-8). Potgieter (1989:7) even speaks about divine authority as 'coercive authority' and of scriptural authority as 'all-determinative' (*alles-beslissend*, Potgieter 1989:8-12).

6. Cf Kuyper's remark: 'Als laatste machtig element in mijn welbewuste epicrise van dit verschijnsel, komt ... *de gezagskwestie*. Ib heb er dorst naar' (quoted by Augustijn 1969a:27). The political leg of all forms of humanism, individualism and 'people's democracies'. (Cf Erikson 1987 as well as Du Plessis' (1924:279-285) criticism of Kuyper's rejecting the French revolution, but accepting the American revolution.)

7. Cf Anderson (1912:84 - emphasis added): ' ... "Higher Criticism" has dethroned the Bible ... And great national interests are also involved. For who can doubt that the *prosperity and power of Protestant nations* of the world are due to the influence of the Bible upon character and conduct? ... And more than this, no one who is trained in the fear of God will fail his duty to his neighbor, but will prove himself *a good citizen*'. Cf also Mauro's (1912:92, 94, 95, 96, 98) consistent assurance that socialism was 'against the Bible', and his warning that critical theology will cause such powerful nations as the United States of America and the British Empire to lose their influence. See also Vander Stelt (1978:58):'To consolidate the relatively new order of political independence, to promote industrial and commercial enterprise, and to recover from Deistic Jacobian hysteria, many prominent leaders found a resource of assurance and stability in the metaphysics of a Christianized version of C SP' (i. e. common sense philosopy).

8. Cf Noll (1985:28-29): 'Princeton [i.e. the fundamentalist section at Princeton] used the Bible to construct dogma, while it was content to accept the cultural conventions of the merchant-yeoman middle-class without exception ...'

9. Compare De Gruchy's (1990:63) description of Afrikaner Calvinism as 'a contextual theology'.

10. Cf Botha's (1991:7,9) remark on the contextuality of historical-critical exegesis.

In what follows, I shall nevertheless discuss his liberation hermeneutics to consider the question whether theologies 'from below' are necessarily also 'contextual'.

## 2.1 The human nature of biblical texts

Compared to Potgieter, Mosala (1989) approaches biblical interpretation from a radically different angle. [11] Not only does he insist on the thoroughly human nature of biblical records, but also on the ideological inclination of their modern interpretations.

He views biblical texts, not as divinely revealed and infallibly inspired, authoritative pronouncements, but as products of ancient class struggles. Biblical texts are 'productions or 'signifying practices' that reconstitute in very specific ways the realities of the material conditions of which they are products' (Mosala 1989:7). Certain biblical pronouncements reflect the ideas of ancient ruling classes bent upon maintaining the social *status quo*, while others reflect the struggle of the oppressed and poor for liberation from the hegemony of the ruling classes.

## 2.2 The ideological nature of interpretation

Many black theologians took their exegetical starting point in an ahistorical interclassist 'revealed Word of God' (Mosala 1989:15) to which there is but one response, namely obedience, and which has to be 'applied to' or 'contextualized in' particular situations (see Potgieter 1989:54-57).

However, the Bible, cannot simply be read as a 'bill of rights' or as an 'ontological product' in which 'the human dignity of all people ... is ontologically inscribed' (Mosala 1989:29). Such a view of Scripture is only possible where the cultural and ideological differences [12] in these texts (Mosala 1989:20) have been harmonised, [13] for the present biblical text conceals ancient class struggles. The relevance of the Bible's message does not flow from its ide-

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11. 'The form of biblical-hermeneutical appropriation suggested in these chapters', Mosala asserts (1989:11), 'is deliberately oblivious to the notion of "scriptural authority" which is at the heart of traditional biblical scholarship'. Mosala (1989:10) argues that traditional biblical scholarship's quest for the historicity and authorial integrity of biblical texts 'define a hermeneutical method rooted in contemporary Western ruling-class anxiety 'about authenticity'. This verdict is also passed on classical historical criticism (Mosala 1989:124).

12. It is precisely because the Bible also contains repressive texts (e. g. on David and Solomon revealing a God of 'law and order' and supporting oppressive measures - Mosala 1989:17), that ruling classes and oppressors can lay claim to 'biblical support' for their exploitation and oppression (Mosala 1989:27). Such a theology is, however, incompatible, with, for instance, the original exodus theology (Mosala 1989:20).

13. It is because such differences have been harmonised in the present text that black theologians use the Bible very selectively without being able to tell *why* they choose certain sections and gloss over others (Mosala 1989:11, 17-18).

alistically construed universality, but issues from its very character as a historical, cultural, political and economic product (Mosala 1989:19-20).

In order to interpret the Bible in a liberating manner, liberation theology should therefore

(a) ' ... effect a theoretical break with the assumptions and perspectives of the dominant discourse of a stratified society' (Mosala 1989:39),[14]

(b) consciously choose a (materialist) hermeneutical model that can expose the class, ideological and cultural assumptions underlying not only models of biblical interpretation, [15] but also biblical texts themselves, and

(c) apply the yard-stick of 'the struggle' to discern the liberation trajectory running through the Bible - albeit 'underneath' the present biblical text or even in the societies 'behind' the text (Mosala 1989:27 - cf p 123), [16] so that the oppressor and oppressed in the biblical texts themselves (Mosala 1989:26) will become visible and so that liberation theologians will be able to tell why certain sections of the Bible hamper the liberation process.

## 2.3 Discussion

Mosala is convinced that his fellow black theologians' interpretations, based upon liberal theology's idealistic Western presuppositions cannot produce a justified relevant interpretation of the Bible. The only way in which one may achieve a truly liberating interpretation is by breaking with Western metaphysics, using 'the struggle' as hermeneutical lens and employing a historical materialist method.

Sceptical as he is about 'contextual theology', Mosala puts his finger on two problems of contextualisation:

(a) Western ontological metaphysics which has often led exegetes to

(b) go about their work, unconscious of their suppositions and methodology.

However, whether his approach will assist us in constructing a contextual theology remains an open question.

Even though historical materialism and its ideology-critical procedures have assisted us a great deal in becoming aware of what we are doing when we interpret biblical texts, [17] it remains another abstract Western social theory which had not been constructed from within the struggle context itself and is

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14. Including certain methods of sociological analysis (Mosala 1989:43ff,55-65). For a similar sentiment, see Amuta 1989:vii.

15. Modern people's reading of the Bible 'is framed by their history and culture' (Mosala 1989:3).

16. So, for instance, the liberating message of Isaiah 61:1-7 has been reworked according to the 'ruling class ideology' (Mosala 1989:38).

17. It is precisely by applying ideology critique that we could discover the 'contextuality' of Potgieter's theology!

as abstract and reductionist as is idealism. It may, perhaps, even be a secular religion with its own imperialistic 'ontology'. Historical materialism may help us understand the effects of the colonial era on the people of Africa, and may therefore seem very relevant to the context, but I am sceptical of

(a) socio-political 'relevancy' as a valid criterion for 'contextuality' as well as of

(b) historical materialism's ability to produce a truly contextual theology.

## 3. Socio-political 'relevance' and 'contextuality'

The usefulness of a theory as an analytical tool does not imply its contextual validity as a synthetic mechanism. The danger of presupposing such an implication can be illustrated by a comparison between Mosala's praise of historical materialism's lens of 'the struggle' as the only valid tool for the construction of a relevant theology and neo-Calvinism's claims to the same effect.

(a) Like Mosala's 'lens', neo-Calvinism was also born in radical opposition to theological traditions and social theories of the time. For instance, according to Erasmus (1946) Afrikaner Calvinism did not 'want to bear the mark of an imported Calvinism, nor to imitate outlandish Calvinism, or to be the mouth-piece of overseas Calvinism,' but followed the '*Boerepad*' and was 'adapted to our national differences of predisposition, the nature of our people, our history and circumstances'.[18]

(b) Like Mosala's hermeneutics, neo-Calvinism was based upon the consciously chosen hermeneutical lens of 'the people'. For instance, the editor of *Die Kerkbode* (*Redaksioneel* 1948:392) explained:

> What we need today, is the brisking up of a true Reformed piety among our people that will be in accordance with Scripture, confession *and the Calvinist character of our people* (emphasis added).

Groenewald (1952:509) described Afrikaner theology as 'a theology sprouting forth from our own soil and *the history of the people*' (emphasis added), and as a theology that could 'prepare better spiritual food for *the people of this soil* than can any foreign theology'.[19]

(c) Like Mosala's 'lens' the lens of Afrikaner civil religion was intolerant of liberal theology's approach. In the literature of the time one often comes across the phrase *contra principia negantem, non est disputandum* (e. g. Kock 1936:85). The Free State correspondent of *Die Kerkbode* even stated ('*Uit die Vrystaat*' 1948:62):

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18. For a fuller discussion of Afrikaner civil religion, see Deist (1990).

19. Compare the remark by Havea (1977:3-4, emphasis added): 'Christianity must be rooted *in our own soil* ...' and produce a 'first-hand, native-rooted' interpretation.

> For the church of Christ there must exist a doctrine next to the Bible ...
> If a person now comes and does not bring this doctrine, church members must leave aside their unscriptural love and tolerance.

In the light of precisely the socio-political consequences of Afrikaner theology I would contend that

(a) a contingent socio-political framework provides too narrow a basis for a truly contextual theology, and may create distance rather than reconciliation among people - and any interpretation that enhances the formation of divisions is, in my view, ethically problematical;

(b) not every theology that is relevant for a particular contingent situation is necessarily contextual, since socio-political relevancy may conceal more profoundly contextual issues, for instance our common context is not one of poverty or oppression, but of a conflict of interests; [20]

(c) not every social theory that can explain a situation is suitable for constructing a truly contextual theology for that situation. For instance, the exclusive terms of historical materialism's revolutionary model are not conducive to a peaceful solution to the conflict, and are therefore problematic from the point of view of *shalom*.

I would therefore suggest that we define 'contextuality' in such a manner that the development of partisan theologies providing an ideological basis for the creation of distance and for the intensification of conflict in the country will be discouraged, by

(a) taking the total South African scene as our context

(b) allowing the whole Bible and Christian tradition to play a meaningful role, so that our construction remains recognisable as theology;

(c) providing a basis for conflicting theologies to remain in constant dialogue, so that we may construct

(d) an ethically defendable contextual interpretation of the Christian tradition for our situation.

A few comments will illuminate these remarks.

## 4. The role of the biblical text in the construction of contextual theology

The distinction between theologies 'from above' and 'from below' may be very misleading. The term 'theology from above' at best describes the belief

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20. This is not to deny the importance of the imbalance between classes in South Africa. On the contrary, defining the problem as a 'conflict of interests', precisely takes the 'class struggle' seriously. However, I want to include into the 'context' also the upper classes, as well as those sections of our white population who feel that their turn for 'the struggle' has now arrived.

of the practitioner of that kind of theology, but not the actual procedure, as we saw in our discussion of Potgieter. Mosala (1989:13) is correct:

> Black theology has exploded the myth of rational objectivity in theology, which presumes to preclude cultural and ideological conditioning. [21]

In its turn the term 'theology from below' simply describes what theology has always been, namely human reflection on current situations in dialogue with earlier (religious) documents about God's involvement in history.

'From below' does not, however, mean 'from within' as if the theologian simply produces a theology through pure observation or meditation. As long as Scripture (together with ecclesiastical tradition) forms part of our discourse, theology will in some sense contain an element not 'from above', but 'from outside'. It is in the dialogue between context and Scripture that theology is made.

Mosala is perfectly correct: the Bible cannot simply be read as a 'bill of rights' or as an 'ontological product' in which 'the human dignity of all people ... is ontologically inscribed' (Mosala 1989:29). He is also correct that the notion of the Bible as the eternal Word of God conceals cultural and ideological differences and conflicts in and behind the biblical texts (Mosala 1989:20). This insight is an enormous improvement on Potgieter's 'objective' approach according to which there is no trace of human history in the Bible.

But after having detected traces of the conflict of interests in the texts, Mosala defuses them by simply 'cutting out' those texts witnessing to power interests. [22] This procedure denies the biblically attested conflicts, their histories and solutions the opportunity of assisting us in interpreting our historical conflicts, so that the Bible becomes a fairly harmless and unchallenging book supplying each class with a mere 'mirror'' in which it can discover itself. In the end the conflicts present in the biblical text is effectively replaced by historical materialism, so that the Bible could as well have been ignored from the outset. In Mosala's approach 'contextual theology' tends to become very little more than materialist sociology.

Even if one conceded Mosala's method of textual analysis, a contextual theology constructed on that basis for the South African scene of conflict, should at least facilitate a dialogue or confrontation among the isolated textual strands in order to construct a (critical) metaphor for our own situation - as

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21. Botha (1991) also refers, rightly, to the influence of methodological developments in sociology, anthropology, linguistics, semantics, semiotics, intercultural communication, and so on.

22. Mosala (1989:121) finds the book of Micah as a whole fairly 'unusable' for liberation theology, since it is a 'ruling class document' and since 'too much deideologization [has] to be made before it can be usable in the struggle for liberation'. The C-section of the book of Micah is assigned to 'a formerly powerful class whose pride has been hurt by exile' (Mosala 1989:133-134), the B-section might be of some use to the 'petite bourgeoisie' (Mosala 1989:141ff), while only the A-section can (partly) address the black working-class (Mosala 1989:149).

suggested by Snyman (1991). By not simply judging and rejecting the opposing view, but using it for, what De Bono (1988:74ff) calls, its 'movement value' [23] or its 'edge effect' [24] (De Bono 1988:48ff) conflicts can help us move forward. It is precisely from such a confrontation between the present and the critical metaphor that a thoroughly contextual theology will emerge which will historically relativise our expressions of faith and make us aware of the fact that we are, as Casañas (1983:125) once said, 'nomads, always on the move'.

## 5. A broader basis for the construction of contextual theology

### 5.1 The inaptness of social analysis as the sole basis for contextualisation

One of the major problems of basing contextual theologies on mere social or political analysis is that social models, such as idealism or materialism, apart from providing us with a short term explanation of society, [25] are supra-cultural models, far removed from the intricacies of being human in a particular cultural set-up Such models are imperialistically imposed on real people, who are thereby reduced to their 'ideas' or their economic and political existence. [26]   Opposing such generalisations about people, Outlaw (1987:34) writes

> 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

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23. De Bono (1988:75) writes: 'Judgement is used to decide whether an idea fits experience: whether the idea is right or wrong. If it is wrong, we label it as such and then reject it or seek to alter it. With the movement idiom we operate outside the judgement system. We use ... the idea to see where it takes us.

24. De Bono (1988:49) says: 'In any conflict once the initial step has been taken [e.g. by rejecting the opposite view] the logic of the conflict takes over from the logic of the situation'. The opposite is also true, though. Once the initial step is taken, e. g. by simply listening to the opposite view, that process develops its own logic and energy.

25. Especially since these theories are themselves short-lived. What Nnolim (1976:71) said of 'committed literature' also holds true for these theories: '... committed literature has a way of dying a natural death - certain to be dulled and dimmed by the fog of time when the issues it fought over are no longer current'. Compare, for instance, Amuta's (1989:72-75) own acknowledgement of the shortcomings of classical materialistic theory in getting to grips with present-day Africa.

26. This holds true for materialism as well, since its deterministic philosophy leaves no room for people as creative spiritual beings, while its theoretical categories reduce real individuals to 'exploited', 'exploiter', 'poor', 'rich', 'middle class', 'upper class', etc.

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.

If this is true, [27] contextualisation based upon a theoretically universalised abstract 'humankind' or that reduces people to their economic or political activities could hardly succeed in constructing a contextual theology. Any effort at contextualisation should, to my mind, take into consideration concrete people as cultural beings.

The brand of Christianity that was introduced to Africa as a whole and South Africa in particular, and which by and large still serves as our 'model', was a thoroughly Europeanised Christianity, fried in Platonic idealism, creamed with Enlightenment rationalism and individualism, and garnished with colonialism. That is why, in the post-colonial era, there has been much theological talk in Africa about 'indigenisation' or 'inculturation' or 'contextualisation' (Burden 1991:3-5). It is in this context that I whole-heartedly agree with Mosala (1989: 39) that we have to ' ... effect a theoretical break with the assumptions and perspectives of the dominant discourse', but then not only with the discourse of 'a stratified society', but also of Western theology as such. Sarpong (1975: 322) is right: it is not Africa that should be Christianised but Christianity that should be Africanised. [28]

## 5.2 Culture as a basis for contextualisation

In a sense culture fulfils the same function as 'tradition' in Cancik's (1970: 18) description:

> Zu den Aufgaben von Tradition gehört die Entlastung von Entscheidungsleistungen. Dieselbe Aufgabe, die das motorische System für die Fortbewegung oder Ritualisierung von Gesten für die freundlich oder feindliche Begegnung übernimmt, leistet die Tradition, als Medium kollektiver Erfahrung, für den sozialen und moralischen Bereich. Als Entlastungswissen gibt Tradition subjektive Sicherheit. Indem erwartet wird, dass die anderen sich traditionsgemäss verhalten, schafft sie durch Konformitätsdruck eine gewisse objektive Sicherheit.

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27. This conviction is also shared by Van Niekerk (1988:48), who observes '[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', and by Shorter (1988:4) who says: 'Human societies not only possess a culture, but are distinguised by it from other societies'.

28. Perhaps we should, in this context, take note of the fact that in Jesus of Nazareth God did not become generally 'human', but became a human 'Jew', so that 'incarnation' and 'inculteration' are actually synonyms.

In this definition culture is not a mere product of socio-economic history, as Amuta (1989:79) suggests, but the 'control room' or 'director's chair' of human understanding [29] which provides

(a) the framework within which members of a culture automatically interprets events in life, [30] as well as

(b) the plausibility structures that help individuals evaluate foreign (e. g. bi- blical or sociological) explanations for their experience.

In terms of the philosophy of science this function of culture could be ex- plained in terms of

(a) Aristotle's (undefined) concept of the self-evidentness of indemonstrable principles: a person socialised in a particular culture will share with that cul- ture the self-evident truth of certain indemonstrable principles of rationality, which will judge incoming information.

(b) Kant's *a priori* categories of reason (time and space), the definitions of which are certainly culturally determined (see Deist 1991c): any explanation for a situation that fits into a culture's *a priori* thought categories will be ac- cepted as a rational explanation.

(c) Whewell's concepts of colligation of facts and consilience of inductions: culture could be viewed as the generator of creative insights explaining a bo- dy of facts, and/or as the most inclusive theory into which acceptable theore- tical explanations for facts [31] should 'fit' before such explanations would be rationally acceptable.

(d) Nagel's concept of growth by incorporation: the acceptability of a theore- tical (theological) explanation for a situation may be dependent upon whether it can be incorporated into a particular cultural view's explanatory system.

(e) Commitment in Kuhnian philosophy of science: just as a particular community of scientists may share a commitment to the existence of theoreti- cal entities (e. g. absolute space or atoms), culture may judge whether the

29. This view of culture does not deny the definite influence of socio-economic experience on the formation of culture, but affirms that consciousness is formed by more factors than just economic circumstances, among which religious beliefs play an important role. Even though religious beliefs may also be formed and influenced by social circumstances, as Croatto (1983) pointed out, religious beliefs (unless they are seen as a form of false consciousness, which theology cannot do), must be allowed to be viewed as a separate 'input' into the cultural sys- tem. I would agree with Fanon's (1967:188) definition of culture: 'A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence'.

30. This framework consists of much more more than religious convictions, as Nwasike (1976:55) correctly pointed out: 'Religion has occupied a central position in most interpretations of African philosophy ... Unfortunately, it [religion] is just a facet and does not represent the whole. The tendency to use religion as a sole vehicle for reaching a total understanding of the culture is, therefore, inadequate'.

31. Whewell already rightly saw that even 'facts' are not pure pieces of information, but un- conscious inferences from the phenomena by our senses (see Losee 1987:121).

5.5 Contextual theologies in creative tension

In order to work towards a contextual South African theology we need

(a) vast research projects aimed at identifying and understanding the (liberal, conservative, traditionalist, radical, rich, poor, idealist, materialist) cultures of the various Christian communities, [35]

(b) to encourage believers from those communities to articulate their theological convictions, [36] and to

(c) let these theologies confront each other in creative tension.

As long as we isolate people in economic, political or social 'monads' and simply devise 'relevant' theologies laying exclusive claim to approach and method, the conflicts endemic in our society will never obtain a creative dimension. To unleash the historical dynamics of conflict, the various methods of interpretation, political convictions, social contexts and life stories (also those occurring in the Bible) should be brought into contact with one another to serve as 'intertexts' among which traces of meaning are dispersed.

Even though the very subject of 'theology' is rooted in Western cultural patterns and is in a sense 'trapped' in a particular way of rational reflection, what Outlaw (1987:30-31) says about the confrontation between 'Western' and 'African' philosophies also holds true for the confrontations among various culturally informed theologies:

[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. [37]

With this suggestion I consciously choose to follow a road opposite to the approach adopted by Amuta in respect of the construction of a 'national literature'. Amuta (1989:70) writes (emphasis added):

In this regard, two conclusions compete for primacy: either that African national literatures and cultures are to be defined in the pluralistic terms

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35. This research would, of course, have to be undertaken using various social/anthropological/philosophical models. Research based upon sociology of knowledge could render a very useful service.

36. Here lies a serious problem. To 'articulate' implies reflection, and reflection implies distance. What I have in mind here, though, is not sophisticated 'theologies', but mere linguistic expressions of religious views that grew from every-day experience.

37. 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 (Fabin 1983:51), or *vice versa*.

revealed by the sheer class and ethnic diversity of the national societies themselves; or that national literature and culture in Africa is to be defined by a nationalist socialist ideal in which *the social class that enjoys demographic dominance and produces the bulk of the wealth of the nation* is also the custodian and repository of authentic national literature and culture. We reject the former and accept the latter, for it is not only just and logical but also theoretically consistent with the [historical materialist] spirit of this essay.

To my mind this (Leninist?) choice reinstates (economic, social and intellectual) imperialism and defuses the creative force operative in conflicting experiences and views.

There are, however, three prerequisites for the success of a pluralistic confrontational approach to function creatively. First, we shall have to learn to understand the other's point of view. What Eliade (1969:4-6) says about understanding other religions *mutatis mutandis* holds true for this process.

Obviously such 'encounters' will become culturally creative only when the scholar has passed beyond the stage of pure erudition - in other words, when, after having collected, described, and classified his documents, he has also made an effort to understand them on their own plane of reference ... Works of art, like 'religious data', have a mode of being what is peculiar to themselves; they exist on their own plane of reference, in their particular universe.

Secondly, we shall all have to be willing to accept the historical relativity of our theologies, and therefore that we will be changed during these encounters. Again a word of Eliade (1969:62) may be illuminating:

Obviously the historian of religions [read: theologian] himself will feel the consequences of his own hermeneutical work. If these consequences are not always evident, it is because the majority of [theologians] defend themselves against the messages with which their documents are filled ... [T]hey fall back on their personal religious faith, or they take refuge in a materialism or behaviorism impervious to every spiritual shock.

The 'change' effected by our 'hermeneutical work', as Eliade calls the process of cultural confrontation, will not only imply an idealistic change of mind, but a process of acculturation, which will effect a change in our shared 'preferred intuitions' and 'commitments'.

Thirdly, such confrontations should occur in the knowledge that the various views complement each other. Tackled in this spirit, contextual theology will in the long run help us establish what 'understanding' in this country means. It is with reference to a comparable situation that Heisenberg (1969:147, 155, 173) wrote (emphasis added):

Verschiedene Beobachtungssituationen ... sind eben häufig komplementär zu einander, dass heisst 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
> ... Betrachtungweisen ergänzen einander auch ... 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 mensch-*
> *lichen 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.

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*.

In South Africa people's 'consciousness' and 'traditions' had already been
changed during the struggle for and against *apartheid*. Once South Africa's
various cultural views come into direct contact in the post-*apartheid* situation,
that historical situation will once again change all forms of consciousness and
tradition. During this confrontation our culturally informed arsenal of
indemonstrable principles, *a priori* thought categories, criteria for the con-
silience of inductions, commitments, and preferred intuitions will all change,
and with these categories also our verdict on what can be accepted as
'rational' explanations of life experiences.

There thus is no 'quick fix' for a truly contextual South African theology. It
is something that will emerge over the decades ahead. But it will also not
emerge by itself. As my colleague, Gerald Pillay, pointed out during a discus-
sion,

> If we are the children of tradition 'in which we move and have our
> being' we tend to refuse to be 'nomads' by (instinctively) seeking to
> erect a dwelling (albeit in the design and materials of our context).

A contextual South African theology has to be consciously sought and
constructed. [38] And to do that, we need theologians of a particular making,
namely theologians that have given up the belief in ontological truths (cf Deist
1983), are willing to live with the insight that all knowledge (also human
knowledge about God) is relative to one's (cultural) perspective, [39] and that
that (cultural) perspective is constantly changing.

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38. Amuta (1989:48) writes in this regard: 'There is ... the erroneous impression that cul-
tural/literary renaissance is a self-generating phenomenon which can be pursued in its own
terms and by itself. Whatever literary culture the Western Renaissance itself bred was the logi-
cal outcome of decisive alterations in the economic, social and political orientation of Europe.'
I would agree with him, except that I would broaden the basis of activity that is necessary to
'bring about' a changed culture from the typically materialist 'list' to include spiritual activity.

39. Bosch (1991:186) puts this idea in the following words: 'Our theologies are partial, and
they are culturally and socially biased ...'

The construction of a contextual theology for South Africa thus calls for theologians who, like Abraham, consciously choose for a perpetual nomadic existence, for

> ... by faith Abraham, when called to go, ... obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going (Heb 11:8 - NIV).

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