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Christian theology at the university: On the threshold or in the margin?

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Rede

**Uitgesproken bij de opening van het academisch jaar 2005/2006 aan de
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mw.prof.dr. E. Mouton

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CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AT THE UNIVERSITY: ON THE THRESHOLD OR IN THE MARGIN?

Geagte Voorzitter rectorium, terugtrede Rector, nuwe Rector, Curatore,
kollegas, studente, vriendinne/vriende van de Teologiese Universiteit
Kampen,

Op 19 April vanjaar (skaars drie weke nadat ek op die dekaanstoel by
die Fakulteit Teologie op Stellenbosch gaan sit het) ontvang ek van Prof Frits
de Lange 'n uitnodiging om op Maandag 5 September “de Openingsrede van
het Academisch Jaar aan de Teologiese Universiteit Kampen te verzorgen”.
Onnodig om te sê dat ek verbysterd was!

En straks volg daar twee redes vir sy versoek: “Dat wij zo de
gelegenheid zullen hebben u als net aangetreden decaan van een
gewaardeerde universitaire partner te ontmoeten, en zo de continuïteit van de
partnerschapsrelatie kunnen bekrachtigen, is één reden voor het verzoek.” Dit
is dan vir my 'n buitengewone groot voorreg én verantwoordelikheid om
binne die verband van die samewerkingsooreenkomst tussen die universiteit
van Kampen en Stellenbosch vandag hier by u te kan optree. Ek dra graag die
hartlike groete en seënwense van die Fakulteit Teologie op Stellenbosch aan u
almal oor, terwyl ons u bedank vir dié geleentheid, maar ook vir die
gasvryheid wat u oor dekades heen aan Suid-Afrikaners betoon het.

Dan was daar 'n tweede rede vir die uitnodiging. Ek haal weer aan:
“Een niet minder belangrijke reden is echter de geëngageerde en contextuele
wijze waarop u in de afgelopen jaren als bijbelwetenschapper de christelijke
theologie hebt beoefend.” En, voeg hy daaraan toe: “De Openingsrede van het
Academisch Jaar heeft in Kampen – in tegenstelling tot die op de dies natalis,
op 6 december, die strikt academisch van aard is - een enigszins bestuurlijk
karakter. De Universiteit zou het bijzonder op prijs stellen als u in een rede in
wilt gaan op de vraag hoe naar uw inzicht in de nabije toekomst de positie, de
rol en de betekenis van de christelijke theologie zal zijn aan de universiteit.
Hoe zal, in de context van de globalisering, de op de kerken georiënteerde
protestantse theologie zich wereldwijd aan de academie ontwikkelen? Voor

welke wetenschapsstrategiese keuzes zal zij komen te staan? Zal zij gemarginaliseerd worden door godsdienstwetenschap, verdrongen in het seminarie? Of zal zij in een getransformeerde universiteit een betekenisvolle bijdrage kunnen leveren aan de humaniteit van vrouwen en mannen? Dat wij daarbij, vanuit de Europese context, zeer benieuwd zijn naar uw ervaringen in Zuid-Afrika, spreekt vanzelf.”

En hoe meer die ingewikkelde vrae soos branders op my aangerol gekom het, hoe meer het ek beseef dat hierdie moment waarskynlik een van die grootste toetsstene vir my hermeneutiek sou wees, en dus deurslaggewend vir die tweede rede van u uitnodiging...

Let me start by giving you a brief overview of the position of faculties of theology at South African universities since 1994 (the country's first democratic elections), and since its new Constitution with a far reaching Bill of Rights. I group them in five categories, all related to processes of internal and/or regional prioritisation. All of these had to adapt their programmes in terms of the multifaceted needs of South African societies:

- At various institutions, faculties of theology were dismantled and reconfigured as part of the human and social sciences, as schools/departments/units of theology and religion, biblical and/or religious studies, religion and culture, or ethics and moral orientation (Universities of the Western Cape, South Africa, Fort Hare, Limpopo, Durban-Westville);
- At Rhodes University (Grahamstown), the Faculty of Divinity, which later became a Department of Divinity, was closed down entirely;
- Four faculties were able to retain their status as “faculties of theology”: North-West (Potchefstroom), Pretoria, Free State (Bloemfontein), and Stellenbosch. At the University of Pretoria two faculties of theology (‘Hervormd’ & ‘Nederduits-Gereformeed’) were consolidated into one faculty;
- Various institutions are in the process of redefining and consolidating themselves within new environments (e.g. University of Zululand, VISTA). Apart from these, various accredited seminaries exist, linked to a variety of church denominations.

At the Faculty of Theology in Stellenbosch we have just been reassured by the rector that its status as a *faculty* would not be at stake as long as we remain academically and financially viable. This assurance has been given in spite of Theology being the smallest of ten faculties, with a total number of 308 students. This probably happened because of its symbolic meaning for the (Reformed) churches, and its strategic value for the university—it is not only the faculty with the largest number of research outputs per capita, but also the highest percentage of postgraduate students compared to its undergraduate students: about 70%-30%. Stellenbosch University has also taken note of the Faculty's diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, and denominations represented in its student and staff profiles. However, even though the study of non-Christian religions (such as Islam, Judaism and African Indigenous Religions) forms part of the curriculum, these are neither presented by practitioners of those religions nor for the training of their leaders.

How would I then anticipate the position, role and function of Christian Theology at the university? Amid all the current socio-religious (secularised, postmodern, pluralistic, and globalised) tendencies and their impact on theological education, I would like to make a few suggestions with respect to the “ideal” situation for Theology. Since Theology does not have any privileged status in a multireligious environment—also with regards to financial support by governmental institutions—it will have to *earn* its right to (continue to) exist as a faculty of Theology in such a society. In my view, this will depend on at least three important choices:

1. The most crucial choice for Christian Theology under any circumstances is to be truthful to its own dynamic, multidimensional, life-giving, ecumenical, community-forming nature and calling. To lose its calling under the pressure of whatever external circumstances, would be the greatest temptation for Christian Theology.

By its very nature Reformed Theology is rooted and embedded within the biblical writings—its authoritative foundational documents. These texts are the result of very real human processes which sought to *understand* and to

interpret transforming experiences arising from the authoritative yet paradoxical presence of a living God. In the case of the New Testament (my field of study), this is dramatically embodied in God's revelation in Jesus of Nazareth. In showing compassion (for instance) to children, tax-collectors, Samaritans and women, Jesus subverts the established values of power in the moral world of first century Palestine. He dies violently at a place where criminals were executed. Through the trauma of the cross's humiliation and shame, a shocking vision of God is presented. The ultimate site where God would *not* be perceived, paradoxically *becomes* the site of God's presence.

Yet, it is particularly in the radical and overwhelming experience of the *resurrection power* of Jesus as the crucified messiah that the origins of Christianity and the New Testament writings have to be sought. Although the concept of resurrection after death was a popular theme in Greek and other mythological narratives, the resurrection of a *crucified messiah*—and especially the life-changing *effects* of Jesus' resurrection—was shockingly and surprisingly new to the Mediterranean symbolic world.

Because the resurrection faith of the early Jesus followers was rooted in paradox, it created an urgent need for *interpretation*. Continuous experiences of God's life-giving Spirit in the present—in diverse and changing social contexts—would constantly challenge them to interpret and reinterpret inherited traditions, and to imagine, re-imagine and reconstruct the future. Any interpretation, including the interpretation of 'religious' experience, obviously happens in the light of available symbols. This would also be the case with the early Jesus followers. They were forced to interpret new experiences and changing circumstances in the light of a pluralistic first-century Mediterranean symbolic world, constituted by diverse and complex combinations *inter alia* of Roman rule, Greco-Roman (specifically Hellenistic) culture, and the religious symbols of Judaism (the torah, prophets and 'writings'). The rapid spread of the movement by many messengers further required flexible adjustment to new settings. In the process they did not so much invent a new language, but rather *reinterpreted, rearranged and reappropriated* available symbols and traditions, particularly from within the symbolic world of torah. In fact, the New Testament *radicalised* inherited

images from the root—particularly those related to *power* and *authority*—by describing the early Christian communities as being *recreated* by God in Jesus Christ, with a radically new identity and ethos.

Similar processes of *experience* and *interpretation* continued during the collection, selection and canonisation of these documents by the early church. This process would be determined fundamentally by the *sensus ecclesiae*, the sense of the church—by its communal discernment and awareness of being inspired and guided by a living God. Through these processes the early church affirmed that those writings—*particularly* in their being addressed to, and conditioned by specific historical contexts—possessed enduring authority and relevance for the church. The ‘relevance’ of these writings would, however, not (necessarily) be the same in every time and place. It is particularly in their *diversity* of settings, genre and style (witnessing to the dynamic relationship between a living, speaking, acting God and living, speaking, acting human beings in the *everyday concrete reality* of their lives) that these texts would be able to address different contexts through the ages. For this reason, the *whole* collection of writings—in all its diversity and even divergence, complexity and coherence—has to be kept alive if the church is to affirm its identity in every time and place.

Such an interactive dynamic provides Christian Theology with a useful framework—namely to act in continuation with those interpretive processes of the early church, while accounting critically for our own acts of interpretation in different times and places. Thus, because of its very roots, and its ability radically to *reinterpret* from within its basic “in Christ” orientation, Christian Theology should be in a good position to welcome, even embrace, a plurality of cultures, ideas and religions, without being threatened by it.

Yet, what would be Christian Theology’s unique contribution to such a context? What would make Christian Theology different from other disciplines reflecting on the same reality? What would be the strategic value of Theology—its rhetorical, life-giving, problem-solving potential—in a pluralistic, multireligious society? Put differently: What would be the educational, formative, and therefore scientific importance of Christian

Theology in a multi-everything context? These, in my view, would be crucially important *qualitative* questions to ask with respect to Christian Theology's position at a (secular) university.

The answer to these questions, in my view, lies in the dynamic yet mysterious ways in which Christian Theology *refers* to the ultimate reality called 'God'. The Christ event was to reconfigure and amplify all previous experiences and interpretations of the God of the Hebrew scriptures. It would challenge the early (and later) Jesus followers radically to revision their everyday lives from within a faith relationship with the living God. If Jesus (as interpreted by the NT writings) then opened up new ways of thinking and speaking about God, humanity and society—*how* did it happen, and how was it supposed to happen?

To be able to explore, know and describe reality is an awesome responsibility entrusted to human beings. Yet, perhaps even more remarkable is the ability of human imagination to *redescribe* reality, to *rename* experiences, to *retell* their stories from new angles. This refers to the human capacity to speak *metaphorically*—to see new possibilities and to make new connections between known images and (past and present) experiences.

Metaphorical language typically permeates the biblical writings. Literary devices such as *genre* (narrative, parable, poetry, apocalyptic symbols), liturgy, art, tradition (as extended metaphor) and even people all function rhetorically as instruments for *redescribing* reality from new perspectives.¹ My interest in metaphor here particularly lies in its imaginative and transformative nature, in its ability to *refer* to an alternative reality, and thus to make sense of this reality. According to Ricoeur, the transformative (authoritative, life-giving) power of a text lies *in its ability to suggest, to open up, to make possible (glimpses of) a 'proposed world' which readers might*

¹ The early Christians—by, for example, referring to God as recreator and redeemer in Jesus Christ; to Jesus as son of God, lord (*kurios*) and saviour; by witnessing to the Spirit as the seal of their ownership by God; to themselves as the body of Christ, God's household, a holy temple—*reimagined* and *renamed* their understanding of God and their (ordinary) life experiences from the new perspective of the Christ event. In this way metaphor can function as a powerful, reorienting lens toward a renewed self-understanding and ethos, toward making sense of the past, present and future.

*adopt or inhabit, an alternative point of view with which they can identify.*² In this way a text may disclose new possibilities—new ways of looking at things, new ways of relating to people, new ways of thinking and behaving. In this way a text has a persuasive thrust toward renewal, toward transformation, inviting people to re-imagine their life stories and to inhabit its world as the real world for them.

What, then, was the language of the New Testament writings—in continuation with Old Testament perspectives—supposed to *do* to their audiences? What were their implied rhetorical *functions*? Ultimately, it seems that these texts were meant to focus their audiences' attention on the God of Jesus Christ and the Spirit—as a *proclamation* of God's pathos, of God's liberating and healing grace toward humankind, but also as an *invitation* to identify with God's revelation and purpose for creation in Christ. According to Sallie McFague, the heart of the drama of Jesus' death and resurrection is the *tension* that it manifests between accepted ways of relating to God and to others, and a new way of living in the world.³ As such, Jesus' life and especially his death, resurrection and ascension have to be viewed as radical and disturbing, continuously calling into question the comfortable and secure homes that our interpretations of God have built for us. Like Christ, his followers are called to lives that always stand in criticism of the status quo and that press toward fulfilment of the body of Christ.

Therefore, for Christian Theology to give account of the nature of these writings *and* their reception in new times and places—as life-giving and sense-making activity—the authority of these texts has to be (re)focused and (re)structured within the dynamic site of continuous *interaction* between God's Spirit, their multiple textual dimensions, as well as the interests, dreams and fears of contemporary faith communities. Such an approach would embrace the many dimensions of the full hermeneutical circle, and would be truthful to the dynamic nature and life-giving, sense-making purpose of these texts. Surprisingly, the spiral movement between the Spirit,

² Ricoeur, P 1975. *Biblical Hermeneutics. Semeia* 4, 29-148.

³ McFague, S 1982. *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in religious language*. London: Fortress, 31-66, 90-194.

scripture and the concrete needs of current audiences is crucial also for the *unlocking* of the liberating meaning of those ancient canonised texts. It is exactly their potentially persuasive power to affirm, to nourish and sustain life—to facilitate new possibilities, to encourage and to console, to invite, move and challenge their receivers to imagine and re-imagine—that makes them authoritative!

Where do such metaphorical acts of redescription occur? It is within the creative yet complex interaction between Spirit, text and context that the imaginative, transforming and authoritative power of Christian Theology comes to the fore. The continuing, risky process by which the early Christians had to learn to match their new identity to a lifestyle and language worthy of their calling, occurred in the creative, ‘liminal’ tension between their understanding of torah and their memories of Jesus. From within this space their hope for the future and their courage to live faithfully in the present would be shaped.

This movement from one insight (position) to another may be described in terms of the typical metaphorical processes of orientation, disorientation (alienation) and reorientation (Ricoeur; McFague). It is in this context that I find the concept of ‘liminality’, from the Latin *limen* for threshold, particularly helpful for describing the complex and ambiguous interface between academia, church and society—the ‘epicentre’ of Christian Theology.⁴ Liminality involves experiences of both the wonder and

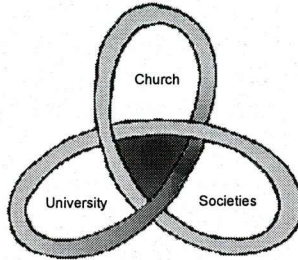
⁴ The concept of ‘liminality’ was introduced by French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, who uses the term ‘rites of passage’ in connection with the ceremonies and rituals performed at different stages in the life cycle of individuals and groups (Van Gennep, A 1960. *The Rites of Passage*. Tr. MB Vizedom & GL Caffee. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1-13, 15-25). In the fields of cultural anthropology and sociology the notion of liminality has since been developed further by several scholars, in particular by North American anthropologist Victor Turner. It has also been adapted and appropriated by theologians such as Gerald Arbuckle and Leo Perdue, both with reference to Turner, and Mark Kline Taylor, with reference to anthropologist Paul Rabinow. Taylor, systematic theologian from Princeton, develops liminality—together with ‘admiration’—as a Christian reconciliatory strategy for dealing with human differences. He observes, “*liminality* is the term I reserve for the kind of life known ‘betwixt and between’ differentiated persons, groups or worlds. This is an experience of the *wonder*, the *disorientation* and *discomfort* that can rise when one is suspended between or among different groups or persons” (Taylor, MK 1990. *Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North-American*

discomfort when one is suspended between different groups, persons or view points. Such delicate processes are implied by the very nature of Christian Theology itself. The majority, if not all, of the implied receivers of the biblical documents found themselves within liminal or transitional phases— characterised by comprehensive changes in the attitude of their minds, from within the concrete political, economic, social and moral conditions of the first-century Mediterranean world. In fact, the creativity, tension, paradox and risk of liminal spaces are implied by these texts as the optimal context for moral formation and spiritual growth.

In continuation with the rich yet fragile nature of these texts I wish to argue that liminality be embraced as an essential characteristic of the Christian life, and of Christian Theology in general. Categories and skills developed by related disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, literary science, classical and modern rhetoric, history, philosophy, hermeneutics— and particularly the arts—would therefore be needed for ongoing explorations of the communication processes represented and stimulated by these texts. That is why Theology needs the larger context of a university to become what it is meant to be. This brings me to a second crucial choice for Christian Theology in a pluralist society.

2. In terms of Tracy's famous publics, Christian Theology today is challenged particularly to account for the dynamic yet complex interface between the *church* (and its foundational texts), *society* (where those texts are supposed to be appropriated in terms of present-day needs), and the *academy* (that explores the universum of knowledge).

Praxis. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000). Taylor describes the liminal space between cultural (including gender) boundaries as a difficult, fragile, risky and trying experience, of which the ambiguities and strains are not easily tolerated. At the same time the liminal encounter represents a dynamic and dialectic process wherein no one remains static. As new alliances are constructed in the interaction between different worlds, people's moral identities and lifestyles are reconstituted by it.



It is at the very *epicentre* of these interrelated and interdependent ‘spirals’ or publics that I wish to argue that the primary functions of theological scholarship have to be defined and nuanced. Since this ‘epicentre’ is such a rich and densely structured space—involving the dynamics and intricacies of divine revelation experienced and interpreted by finite human beings—its exploration will of necessity be an interdisciplinary and ecumenical task.

Where could this happen (best)? To quote Tracy again: “Every great religious tradition lives by welcoming a genuine critical community of inquiry. In any religious tradition, the university (the academy in all its forms) is precisely one of the singular places where the freedom to enter the critical conversation occurs.” The question for the church, however, often is: Can a community of inquiry and a community of commitment and faith be united? Of all the disciplines, Tracy continues, “theology is that one where action and thought, academy and church, faith and reason, the community of inquiry and the community of commitment and faith are most explicitly and systematically brought together.”⁵

The choice for Christian Theology, therefore, is to move beyond *intra*-disciplinary conversation and cooperation to *inter*-disciplinary conversation and cooperation *before* we are forced into it. The twenty-first century would not tolerate any ghetto theology but calls for bold, unthreatened conversation from within its unique orientation (epicentre).

This would imply that even where Theology is absorbed into faculties

⁵ Tracy, D 2002. On Theological Education: A Reflection, in Petersen, RL & Rourke, NM (eds), *Theological Literacy for the Twenty-first Century*. Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 13-22.

of arts and the human sciences that it would not *only* be negative. Even though theological specialisation may then be decreased and the crucially important coherence of theological education inhibited, will it still be important to stay in conversation with other disciplines in order to account academically, to justify theologically the content of the Christian faith in relation to other religious expressions.

3. This brings me—in continuation with the previous two aspects—to a third choice for Christian Theology in a pluralist society, namely to include the stories of all “others” into its story, particularly those stories that radically differ from its own. The narratives of people, the forms of all cultures in a multicultural church, represent new forms of theological education to which the new century will increasingly introduce us.

If we say that ongoing processes of *experience* and *interpretation* within liminal space are characteristic of the Christian faith, we may ask more concretely about the spatial settings *where* such interpretations occur. As the experience and interpretation of the early Jesus followers occurred in concrete geographical, socio-economic, political, religious and philosophical contexts, the bible is read analogously in (South) Africa today from within many diverse socio-cultural, historical and economic-political contexts.

To illustrate the dire need for responsible, intelligible, life-changing Christian Theology at this moment in history, I briefly refer to two stories from Africa during the past two decades—one from a (‘western’, Euro-American) ‘postmodern’ perspective, and the other from a (two-thirds world, ‘non-Euro-American’) ‘postcolonial’ point of view. Both, from related yet distinguishable angles, present elements of the struggle for survival and sense-making on the continent. Both resist and subvert domination by a particular group, person or institution, including the idea of absolute, objective truth. Both offer alternative perspectives, and have serious implications for how people speak about God, and for how they respond to social challenges. Both may (and probably will) influence the moral choices of believing communities in years to come in significant ways.

First a story (or few observations rather) from South Africa. The radical

processes of transformation taking place in South Africa since 1994, with numerous societal shifts, have left no person or institution untouched—including the church and theological education. In spite of significant shifts away from simplistic, one-sided interpretations of the bible, relations among various forms of theology/faith and socio-economic realities in South Africa remain extremely complex. As far as Reformed theology in general is concerned, “(i)t cannot be denied that, both within the Reformed communities and from the perspective of outsiders, apartheid has given the Reformed tradition, and even Christianity itself, a bad reputation in South Africa and has caused a lack of credibility and even self-confidence” (Smit 1999).⁶ In the process many people—black people and women in particular—feel *disillusioned* and *deceived* by the many ways in which scripture had been used to justify and solidify racial, gender and other forms of apartheid within and among people, even between them and God. For such people to be surprised (again) by scripture’s liberative and healing power has indeed become an enormous challenge.

Although the present moment in South Africa bears the promise of a new, more accountable hermeneutic awareness, it ironically often seems to *strengthen* the deeply entrenched sense of alienation among and within people. A potentially constructive yet dangerous consequence of a secular (‘westernised’) society and ‘postmodern’ thinking, for instance, is that they lead to a breakdown of the hegemony of truth claims.⁷ Instead of celebrating the richness of plurality and complementarity, of *sharing* one another’s identities and stories of joy and pain (what I want to believe postmodern thinking is about), the postmodern attitude for many becomes synonymous with a certain *disintegration*, with a *loss* of orientation and cohesion, the *loss*

⁶ Smit, DJ 1999. Can we still be Reformed? Questions from a South African perspective. Unpublished paper read at international conference on ‘Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity’, Heidelberg, Germany, March 18-22, 1999.

⁷ In a secular, postmodern society no institution, including Christianity with its Truth claims (with a capital T and in the singular) and authoritative biblical texts, has any privileged status. For many people this means that all truth claims merely become a matter of opinion, and that morality is a matter of personal preference. Quite often the emphasis is on *different* rationalities and view points, with little regard for that which binds people together.

of a collective moral identity, memory and destination, and consequently, the *loss* of a corresponding (corporate) ethos of dignity and respect for life, of responsibility and involvement, with a general attitude of 'who cares?'. For many this means a loss of trust in all forms of leadership—including church leadership. Due to such detached and disinterested attitudes, extreme postmodernist thinking necessarily fails to cultivate a sustainable agenda for transformation.

From a rhetorical perspective, such a profound sense of loss pertains to all three the basic elements of communication (sender-message-receivers), to which Aristotle referred as *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos*. In South Africa, many people—including Christians—have lost trust in the *ethos*, integrity, truthfulness and authority of their (pastoral) leaders, as well as the *logos*, content, authority and intention of their (spoken and nonverbal) 'words', even the truthfulness of the bible itself. Consequently, the *pathos* of their audiences, the rhetorical *effect* of their words and gestures in the lives of people, is often inhibited detrimentally, leading to a sense of *apathy*—particularly among critical thinkers and historically disadvantaged groups. With regard to Christianity, all these prerequisites for authoritative communication have come under deep suspicion, have lost credibility, and need to be revisited fundamentally.

As far as the church is concerned (and these seem to be worldwide trends), the tendencies of disintegration and lack of memory go against its distinctive nature as a diverse yet uniting, life-giving and life-sustaining *community*. These trends often tragically witness to the reality that Christians somehow have lost their *orientation and integration*, their sense of calling, their *primary identity as Christians*. This is essentially a *theological* (or 'spiritual') problem, which often manifests itself as a 'moral crisis', but in actual fact goes much deeper. It therefore calls for a careful and coherent *theological* response.

This brings me to a second story from Africa. Like the first one, this story underlines the importance of *theological perspective*, *communal identity* and *choice* in Christian people's daily ethos, particularly with regards to their

public responsibility. It also shows how (biblical) story can function to open up and facilitate alternative perspectives on reality.

A remarkable contemporary example of continuous interpretation stimulated by the biblical texts is to be found in the activities and writings of *The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians*, founded in 1989. The Circle consists of about 400 women from across Africa, within various contexts and disciplines, committed to searching for, and publishing on creative alternatives to *all forms of power abuse and injustice* in African churches and societies, and to gender justice in particular. From their efforts originated the *Institute of African Women in Religion and Culture* at Trinity Theological College in Accra (Ghana), of which Professor Mercy Amba Oduyoye is the director.⁸

From the outset the Circle's consultation for African biblical and cultural hermeneutics was challenged with issues of methodology, particularly with respect to the new approach of African feminist readings of the bible. They were to devise alternative ways of reading the bible that would account for African women's life experiences from within a plurality of religious, socio-cultural, geographical, racial, political and economic contexts, and that would encourage and inform discourses and practices toward radical church renewal and transformation. These ways of reading were to account not only for the continuing authority of (written) biblical texts in those

⁸ What makes the contributions of the Circle particularly remarkable, is how boldly its members take responsibility for their own destiny, in spite of their disillusionment with how the bible often functions in (mainly patriarchal socio-cultural and church) contexts in Africa, and amid the dire societal needs of the African continent with respect to employment (poverty), health (HIV/AIDS, prostitution, neglect of environment), education and safety (violence, 'trafficking in women'). A fundamental problem for women (including Christian women) is *the polarity between the household and public sphere*. Women's roles (in church and society) are defined largely by their household roles, leading to unequal power, even when secular laws provide for equality. Recognising how important the bible is for churches in Africa, the Circle takes as a primary challenge the task of deconstructing some old and reconstructing anew the ways in which the bible is being read. Their consistent emphasis is on the necessity to reread the bible through women's eyes *if there is to be gender justice in the church* (cf the "Final statement of the Women's pre-council meeting" to the 24th Assembly of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Accra, Ghana, on July 31, 2004, in which a large group of Circle members participated).

contexts, but also for the authority of other vibrant texts in the lives of women, such as (oral) African cultures.

For the purpose of developing African women's ways of interpretation, the Circle shows a preferential option for a *storytelling* approach. Many reasons have been articulated for considering narrative to be a potentially powerful instrument (lens) for rereading the bible and culture toward liberating and healing practices in churches and societies.⁹

Women interpreting the bible in Africa is of course not a new phenomenon. Within various church traditions women form the backbone of core activities such as bible study, catechetical training, women's auxiliary associations and works of compassion. However, because of the socio-culturally determined private and submissive position of most African women—often ironically legitimised by one-sided biblical interpretations—the (public) voices of women had been kept silent for centuries.

The emergence of African women's contextual biblical hermeneutics as a response to the situation, however, is relatively new and certainly to be

⁹ I list some of them, which aptly illustrate the imaginative, transforming power of (biblical) story as extended metaphor (cf Dube, MW 2001 [ed]. *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Atlanta: SBL / Geneva: WCC Publication, 3-13):

- Storytelling in Africa, very much like singing and dancing, is largely a participatory and performative activity. Listeners are invited to comment and add their interpretations through which fixed stories are opened up for continuous and fresh retelling. As such it is a familiar *genre* to literate as well as illiterate audiences;
- In Africa, storytelling is a *traditional source of theology*. Narrative provides space for alternative visions, perspectives and values in the struggle for economic, ecological, gender and racial justice;
- Various characteristics of African stories make them useful toward developing biblical and cultural hermeneutics that empower women. Many African stories (including proverbs and idiomatic sayings) represent philosophies and strategies of survival. Stories are often gender-neutral and could be used subversively to counteract patriarchal and colonising interpretations of life. As such they provide a lens for social analysis and critique, as well as *role models for resistance against, and survival amid* oppressive systems and institutions;
- Stories hold the potential of *re-imagining, re-telling* and *re-enacting* the experiences of biblical women from the perspectives of later audiences. Biblical narratives are retold and re-imagined through the biographies of women living in patriarchal societies. They identify with the point of view of those narratives as if they were insiders in the story. In this way the dynamic nature of ancient texts may be unlocked in fresh and surprising ways, *even beyond the intentions and capabilities of their patriarchal author.*

welcomed and encouraged. By placing the presence, contribution and survival of women in history at the centre of the interpretive process, these women introduce academic and non-academic interpreters of the bible to new understandings of both the biblical texts and present-day contexts. By so doing they invite later audiences to build a world in continuation with biblical perspectives that would honour diversity and justice. Through re-telling and re-imagining biblical stories from their socio-cultural perspectives, African women do not only find models of power abuse which relate to their own circumstances, but also models of women who creatively use their power to empower others. In the process *the oppressed boldly and ironically become agents of their own empowerment.*

How could Christian Theology respond to this ‘tale of two stories’—to the present *kairos* of postmodern *and* postcolonial thinking and practices (in Africa)? What attitudes and actions would match the proportions of such an opportunity, and contribute to lasting solutions? How could Christian Theology mediate the discernment of an alternative world, a world characterised by God’s radical presence, as suggested above?

If the epicentre of Christian Theology is characterised by such a rich yet complex dynamic, it certainly provides Theology with important clues toward the ethos and pathos of its task. While honouring the paradox of richness and complexity, Christian theologians have hopeful and powerful perspectives to offer. If, as we have seen, the authority of the biblical texts lies in their metaphorical ability to disclose a radically new perspective on reality and a new way of living in the world, Christian Theology is challenged to do *likewise*—to mediate the discernment of such an alternative world, a world characterised by God’s radical presence in Jesus Christ and the Spirit. It is in this regard that I believe that Theology is called to assist the church—particularly with respect to its social responsibility—by becoming *a liminal site*, by boldly stepping into those risky, liminal spaces and to facilitate dialogue among diverse and even divergent discourses from within its multidimensional epicentre.

Thus, whoever ‘we’ are as Christian theologians, whose interests and voices ‘we’ represent (or ignore), whom ‘we’ choose as discussion partners (and whom not), will determine the *pathos*, the persuasive power and life-giving authority of ‘our’ words and actions in significant ways. Let me therefore try to summarise the opportunities for Christian Theology at the university at the beginning of the multireligious, pluralistic twenty-first century. I have argued that Theology is challenged with (at least) three crucial choices:

- Firstly, to be truthful and committed to its own multidimensional, life-giving, ecumenical nature and inheritance. As prerequisite for interdisciplinary dialogue, Theology has to focus on its own coherent study—with excellence and sophistication, and with spiritual vitality. It has to undo the devastating separation of spirituality from theology and philosophy in our ideas of a proper education. “Even metaphysics and the most abstract theology serve not only an intellectual but a spiritual purpose” (Tracy 2002:20-21);
- Secondly, Theology needs to remember that it is on the threshold of open, multidisciplinary and interreligious dialogue (not from “neutral” outsider perspectives!) that definition of, and appreciation for, its own traditions are being strengthened and re-established. Christian Theology cannot afford to withdraw into a ghetto theology, or even from the university context into seminaries. (This, however, necessarily means that Theology would involve itself in critical public discourse with the philosophical and scientific presuppositions implied in the ethos of modern universities);
- Theology has, thirdly, to be connected to the life stories and multiple needs and dreams of people today. In order to become centres of authoritative, life-giving knowledge and practical wisdom, faculties of Theology may have to reconfigure themselves in terms of other “non-church” careers (such as education, media, caring for the sick and the deprived).

However, would these “ideals” be powerful and persuasive enough to carry us

through the impasse of secularisation and the new economic dangers of globalisation? There are simply no guarantees. Yet, allow me to invite you to ponder a final possibility.

It should be evident that the interactive epicentre of Christian Theology is a surprisingly rich yet complex, noisy and even messy space. If its inhabitants would be truthful to its nature and purpose, they would first of all have to experience the silence, solitude, perceptivity, sensitivity and *sense-ibility* that would enable them to hear, to see, to feel, to smell, to taste, to discern, to make sense of the past, present and future, and to be moved toward imagining new possibilities. In order for Christian Theology (still) to be taken seriously, to be *heard*, to be authoritative and life-giving, community-building and problem-solving, we first need to become ‘receivers’ ourselves, to listen carefully and prayerfully to what those ancient canonised texts sought to *accomplish*, and to pay special heed to their intended *functions* in various contexts then and now.

If such are the sensibilities required at the epicentre of Christian Theology—as requisite for its *pathos*, persuasive thrust and healing power—it is, according to its very nature, a deeply sacred, sacramental and liturgical subject, utterly dependent on God’s grace for its survival in a secular world. I therefore finally suggest that what we as theologians and church leaders need most is a *hermeneutic of listening*. A ‘hermeneutic of listening’ implies the willingness to hear with openness and receptivity. It includes *paying attention to, acknowledging, submitting to* the paradoxical, life-giving authority of God’s words in human language. As such it would be truthful not only to the nature of the texts we study, but also to the Reformed principle of biblical reading as listening to, as *discerning the voice of the living God*. A hermeneutic of listening reclaims the life-changing, transformative potential of the biblical writings as an invitation to accomplish a healed and healing body of Christ. It will therefore embrace and enable (public) responsibility and *action*, knowing that those texts are the result of actions and are intended to produce action. A hermeneutic of listening will pay attention to all the voices represented in the epicentre of Christian Theology, refusing mentally to block out the voices that have not been considered important in the past,

including the silenced voices within the biblical texts themselves. “Such openness does not eliminate a hermeneutics of suspicion and evaluation, but it does eliminate a hermeneutics of arrogance and of accusation and a presumption that prejudges and presumes the ancient world should look like the modern or that we already have the truth. Humility is part of a hermeneutics of hearing; it seeks to know *rather than professes to know*” (Snodgrass 2002:28)!¹⁰ It therefore does not offer universal, absolutistic, final and unalterable answers, decisions and certainties, but rather seeks for solutions that would be truthful to, and that would make sense in individual contexts. It challenges us to live patiently and humbly with the tension of risk—the risk to remember, to love, to forgive, to hope—the tension of paradox, ambiguity, ambivalence, even ridicule and pain.

Ultimately, a hermeneutic of listening gives *priority* to the imaginative possibilities of God’s radical, liberating, healing love over the broken realities of our lives and the world, including the ‘world’ of (secular) universities. In this way it allows for moral *confidence* instead of (absolute) certainty. The early Christians were overwhelmed and surprised by God’s presence in the resurrected Jesus and the Spirit, even though they could not understand fully. Perhaps ‘we’ as Christian Theologians today should no longer wait but simply *prepare* to experience this likewise. That is my sincere prayer for you in your new academic year.

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¹⁰ Snodgrass, K 2002. Reading to hear: A hermeneutics of hearing. *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24, 1-32.

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