

Towards an ethics of interpretation: The use of scripture in three recent Christian documents

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Abstract

Three documents have recently appeared which all appeal to Scripture in their elaboration of a vision for the church's involvement in society. This paper assesses the manner in which the Bible functions within the broader interpretative stance of each document, namely *Church and Society*, *Road to Damascus* and *Relevant Pentecostal Witness*. In order to achieve this, attention is first paid to the establishment of criteria which should form part of a common explanatory commitment to which all position papers should adhere. It is argued that the ideological stance of both the interpreter and Scripture should be acknowledged, so that the relative merits of the various documents can be intersubjectively tested.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, the ongoing process of reflection by Christian groups on socio-political and other matters, has witnessed the publication of, amongst others, three significant documents. I refer to *Church and Society*, the statement which was approved by the Dutch Reformed Church in its original (1986) and revised form (1990), as well as to *Road to Damascus* and *Relevant Pentecostal Witness*.¹ These publications afford a crucial insight into the perspectives of at least some of the interest groups

which are involved in the dialogical and consultative search for greater understanding within our deeply polarised society.

The specific concern which informs the present paper is that such dialogue can only be meaningful if all partners in the debate are prepared to clarify the status which they accord to Scripture as the primary source of their respective societal analyses. While this concern has received much attention in theological circles (Vorster 1984:204-219; Goba 1986:61-65; Loader 1987:3-18), the obfuscation which may be generated by an unreflective appeal to biblical warrants remains a persistent threat. The point is that each document may be regarded as a model, which either functions in a considered manner or quite simplistically in establishing a relationship between Scripture and socio-political reality (cf Van Huyssteen 1989:179).

The first aim of this paper is therefore to address the issue of an ethics of interpretation. In using the term 'ethics', it is contended that all participants in the current debate have a moral responsibility to provide verifiable grounds for the knowledge which they claim to glean from Scripture (cf Deist 1979:16-21). Such an explanatory commitment cannot avoid the issues which pertain to the broader interdisciplinary conversation in which theology has become inextricably involved during recent years. The impact of perspectives from fields such as reception theory, the sociology of knowledge and also the philosophy of science has therefore forced theologians to be far more articulate in the formulation of their beliefs.

Clearly, considerable attention must be paid to certain basic interpretative and explanatory criteria to which all models may reasonably be expected to conform. In the second place, however, the specific models which form the focus of the present paper will be assessed in the light of these theoretical considerations. My own interest in this matter is not merely academic. As a practicing member of the Dutch Reformed Church, I react from a position of solidarity with a church whose past involvement in unacceptable racial policies has bedevilled the possibility of constructive dialogue in the South African context.

2. ASPECTS OF AN EXPLANATORY COMMITMENT

2.1 *Between utilitarianism and essentialism*

In the light of the complexity of the modern hermeneutical debate, it is only possible to explore a few facets of an explanatory commitment that has far wider ramifications. The position which is advocated by the present paper corresponds to the opinion of Boff (1987:135-139), who, discussing the concept of the hermeneutic circle, warns against the two dangers of hermeneutical improvisation and semantic positivism.

The dialectic between Scripture and the reading community points to a relationship of invitation and response, or question and answer, which is constitutive of the realisation of meaning. Semantic positivism dissolves this dialectic by attempting to determine the meaning of the text in a definitive and final manner. Thereby the role of the interpreter is reduced to that of a neutral applicator of interpretative technique. For its part, hermeneutical improvisation entails a thoroughly utilitarian use of Scripture as a mere confirmation of predetermined positions. The realisation that all interpretation is innovative and personal, and therefore more or less arbitrary, does not abrogate the necessity for serious engagement with the text (Boff 1987:136-138).

Boff's argument amounts to a refusal to dissolve the dialectic tension between the text and the reader into an accommodation to the claims of either a full-blown subjectivism or a positivistic essentialism (Boff 1987:136; cf Rowland & Corner 1990:67-68).² His stance provides a useful basis for reviewing a number of important insights that are endemic to the discussion of interpretative criteria.

2.2 The interested nature of the interpretative enterprise

Whatever else it may imply, the criticism of semantic positivism dismisses the notion of objectivism which is inherent to the assumption of both a fixed textual meaning and a disinterested exegesis. Within the parameters of the present discussion, it is only proposed to sketch a few insights from the fields of reception theory and the sociology of knowledge in order to demonstrate the extent to which the act of interpretation is linked integrally to the interests by which it is informed.

Two prominent members of the Konstanz school, namely Iser and Jauss, both developed theories of reception which point to the creative interaction between the reader and the text. For Iser (1978:34-37) the production of meaning consists of a complex interaction between the textual structure, or, in other words, the text as a network of response-inviting strategies, and the structured act of reading. By means of its strategies, the text develops a specific repertoire by invoking socio-historical norms and literary conventions, and presenting them in an internal combination which leads to their defamiliarisation and the resulting suspension of their validity (Iser 1978:69-85). As a result the reader is confronted with a sequence of perspectives which are full of indeterminacies (Iser 1978:169, 182-185, 202-203, 212-213; 1980:111-112).

The reader responds to these indeterminacies by providing a specific configuration of the textual schemata, and therefore participates in a creative actualisation of meaning. Iser (1978:135-159) typifies this productive process as one of 'image-buil-

ding', thereby pointing to the role of the reader's imagination in the continuing tension between new and previous horizons of understanding.

Whatever the criticisms levelled at Iser (cf Eagleton 1983:79-86),³ his theory holds important implications for the interpretation of not only the modern novel but also the Bible. In the first place, it is clear that the meaning of the text can only be fulfilled in the reading subject, and that it is impossible to conceive of the act of reading as a one-way process which involves a direct internalisation of pre-existent textual truth (Iser 1978:107, 146-152; 1980:119; also Long 1990:348-349). Secondly, this consideration leads to the further conclusion that the reader becomes a semiotic topic in his own right (Vorster 1989:58-61). In other words, the reader's production of meaning must be evaluated in sociological terms with reference to the specific interests by which it is guided (Iser 1978:151).

The realisation that the act of reception necessitates a critical examination of the social praxis from which it emanates is also endemic to the work of Jauss (cf Schüssler Fiorenza 1990:367). By pointing to the shifting horizons of expectation which accompany the reception of the literary work, he clearly dispels the notion of a direct mediation of timeless textual truths (Jauss 1982:21, 28-29). Indeed, the present experiential horizon may lead to fresh actualisations of significance which could not be realised within the horizontal limitations of past receptions (Jauss 1982:34-35). Clearly, then, meaning is produced through a continual process of reception, and any interpretation invites analysis of the influences, both literary and socio-historical, by which it is informed (Jauss 1982:29-32, 39-41).

The insights of reception theory converge with those of the sociology of knowledge to highlight the ideological predisposition which inescapably influences all theological reflection in its use of Scripture (cf Lockhead 1976/1977:81-82; Kim 1978:72-76).⁴ The matter of ideological commitment remains an evocative issue on at least two counts. Firstly, the diffuse connotations with which the concept of ideology is invested, seriously impair its clarificatory capacity. Secondly, the reality of ideological commitment may too easily assume the force of a slogan which facilitates hermeneutic improvisation, by legitimating the adoption of any predetermined stance. It is important, therefore, to explain the significance which is attached to the concept within the present analysis of interpretative interest.

In this respect, it is useful to refer to Geuss (1981:4-26) who argues that the concept of ideology may enjoy three broad connotations, namely pejorative, descriptive and positive. Against scholars who wish to delimit the usage of the term to its pejorative connotations (e.g. Kern 1980:96-97), its wide-ranging currency in the present debate rather suggests that all three senses should be retained in the consideration of an adequate explanatory project.

The pejorative understanding points to the phenomenon of false consciousness, which may be based on incorrect epistemic, functional or genetic properties (Geuss 1981:12-22). The contribution of the Frankfurt school, which Geuss proceeds to discuss at some length, lies in the development of a critical theory which possesses the reflective ability of making agents aware of hidden and even self-imposed coercion by means of a consistent programme of ideology critique (Geuss 1981:26, 55, 74-75).

Ideology criticism forces all interpreters to reject the dichotomy between knowledge and interests which is implicit in the notion of a pure and value-free theory (Habermas 1978:301-317). In particular, Habermas's identification of the emancipatory cognitive interest provides a powerful tool for freeing the subject from hypostatic relations of dependence (Habermas 1978:309-311). Adherents of liberation theology, amongst others, make use of such insights in their development of a programme of conscientisation, which not only dismisses the notion of a value-free exegesis but also unmask the interests which are legitimated by such an appeal to neutrality (cf Bonino 1986:348-351; Segundo 1977:126-138).

Geuss identifies an additional aspect of the programme of ideology criticism, which holds important implications for the present discussion. The point is that there are two senses in which the reflective responsibility of the critical theory exceeds its emancipatory function from bondage and delusion. Firstly, it should be able to give an explicit account of its own context of origin and its context of application (Geuss 1981:55-56). Secondly, it should be able to counter false consciousness by pointing to the agents' 'real' or 'rational' interests, in other words the values which they would espouse and actively pursue under ideal circumstances which were free of coercion and delusion (Geuss 1981:44-54, 57-58, 75-88). With Geuss (1981: 63-69), it should be accepted that the determination of such real interests remains a thoroughly contextual issue.⁵

The implication of the preceding remarks, is that the issue of ideology entails more than the exposée of the false consciousness which a particular theological model may claim to identify in other models. Rather, its explanatory commitment extends to the clarification of the specific context in which it advocates its own position, as a situational response which is geared to providing its particular audience with the most rational possible resolution of its interests.

Inherent in such a responsibility is the consideration of ideology as both a descriptive and positive concept. As Mannheim (1936:57-62, 68-69) has definitively indicated, the term ideology transcends its pejorative connotations, to enjoy a total-general sense which recognises the situational determination of all thought (cf also Kim 1978:61-63; Ricoeur 1981:239-240).⁶ All knowledge is therefore relational, and reflects the position of the interested subject (Mannheim 1936:70-71, 76).

Now, it is possible for such a recognition to function in a purely descriptive sense, and therefore to content itself with the mere non-evaluative acceptance that a certain social cultural system will be characterized by a particular constellation of beliefs, attitudes and dispositions (Geuss 1981:4-9). Alternatively, however, ideology may be approached as a positive project, involving the deliberate construction of a programme of action which aims to facilitate the reorganisation of society in order to fulfil specific needs and interests (Geuss 1981:22-26). Mannheim (1936: 173-177) refers to such a pursuit of realisable transformatory goals as 'utopia'.

To my mind, theology's acceptance of the reality of ideological commitment means more than a passive, or even nonchalant, resignation to the inevitability of situationally determined interpretation. Rather, it implies a dialogue with Scripture which embraces the search for an optimal ordering of a specific social context, while fully recognising the contingency that adheres to such an endeavour (cf Kim 1978: 66). Such an enterprise also involves a critique of forms of false consciousness, a matter which obviously raises the question of evaluative criteria when, as in the South African context, competing theological models vie for acceptance. As will be discussed shortly, it is the contention of this paper that it is possible to engage in such an evaluative enterprise, in the sense that some models may lay claim to greater rationality than others.

2.3 The ideological determination of the Bible

The reality of ideological conditioning extends beyond the interpreter to include the other partner in the dynamic interaction between Scripture and the receptive agent, namely the text itself. With Segundo (1977:112, 116-118), it may be maintained that the Bible contains diverse traditions and bodies of material which preserve the ideological interests of the different contexts in which they were formed, and which witness to quite different portrayals of the relationship between God and society. The ensuing remarks will merely sketch a few insights with respect to the increasing scholarly recognition of the diversity of the Old Testament (cf Goldingay 1987: *passim*). Similar insights could be developed with respect to the New Testament.

One profitable manner of exploring this diversity is by means of the model of trajectories, according to which a particular theme or concept is examined along the axis of its historical development (Brueggemann 1979:161-162; Goldingay 1987:40-43). On the analogy of Steck's (1977) typification of a stream of tradition, a trajectory can be understood as an extensive intellectual or notional sphere which is expressed by means of characteristic conceptual and linguistic categories, and which exercises influence for an appreciable historical period (Steck 1977:191-198). Thus

Steck (1977:183-214), even though he does not use the term 'trajectory', points to the diverse streams of tradition which characterized the major epochs of Israel's history.

The analysis of trajectories affords an insight into the tensions between some of the major Old Testament traditions. Brueggemann (1979:161-185; 1985:303-325), for instance, points to the conflicting ideological presuppositions which inform the Mosaic tradition, with its egalitarian and radical social ethos, in contrast to the Davidic tradition with its structure-legitimizing tendency. Significantly, however, he moves beyond the mere identification of trajectories to the matter of the adjudication of their relative weight (Brueggemann 1985:315-321). According to Brueggemann, the thrust of the Old Testament, both in its shaping of the canon and in its depictions of God, points to the primary nature of the Mosaic tradition. This primary emphasis must emerge in conversation with contemporary dialogue partners such as the poor and disenfranchised, who share the same ethical orientation. In passing, it may be noted that Brueggemann's concern for the Mosaic trajectory parallels the work of Croatto (1981:passim) on the development of the Exodus trajectory throughout the Old and New Testament as the authentic biblical axis of liberation.

Brueggemann's reference to the matter of adjudication raises at least three issues in connection with the ideological conditioning of the Bible. Firstly, the acceptance of diverse biblical ideologies should not engender a type of hermeneutic improvisation which sanctions any predetermined position.⁷ While one must acknowledge the difficulty of the evaluative enterprise (cf Goldingay 1987:97-133), and the thoroughly contextual nature of any engagement with Scripture, there are certain focal biblical emphases which cannot be ignored. Perspectives such as God's identification with the poor and the marginalised are so pervasive that they constitute challenges which the biblical text issues to all of its readers (cf Sanders 1984:54-56).

The manner in which any model mediates between these central themes will invariably reveal the interests of a specific socio-historical transaction between the reader and the text (cf Sanders 1984:67, 77-78). This leads to the second point, namely that any situational adjudication between biblical ideologies should remain open to emphases which may be less germane to the interpreter's perception of the thrust of Scripture itself (cf Barr 1973:156-161; Sanders 1984:37; Goldingay 1987:129-133; Jodock 1990:377).⁸ Brueggemann (1985:316-318) himself insists that the Mosaic and Davidic trajectories should be upheld as traditions in tension. A sensitivity to such fundamental scriptural polarities is vital for a theology which is prepared to acknowledge the provisional nature of any commitment to a specific programme of social action.

Thirdly, any model should explicitly clarify the reasons which lie behind its espousal of certain biblical ideologies. More specifically, the model should motivate the status which it accords to the focal ideologies, both in terms of its perception of the thrust of Scripture and with respect to the socio-historical context in which it performs its evaluative activity.

2.4 Establishing an ethics of interpretation

The preceding methodological discussion has highlighted a number of aspects which are integral to an explanatory commitment. However, fundamental as it may be, the acknowledgement of the interested nature of all interpretation only forms part of the larger ethical issue. Paradoxically, it could even be argued that such an admission is not particularly helpful, for in destroying the illusion of objectivity it may open the door for a rather complacent relativism. As has been contended with respect to both the interpreter and the text, the concept of ideology should not be used as a means of legitimising virtually any exegesis of Scripture. Some models may lay claim to greater rationality than others.

In support of this contention, it is instructive to note recent attempts to define a theory of rationality which dismisses the rigid positivistic distinction between truth and falsity,⁹ in favour of a more flexible approach which recognizes that beliefs and attitudes can be more or less rational (Geuss 1981:30-31; Van Huyssteen 1989: passim). For Van Huyssteen (1989:143-197), rationality becomes a thoroughly contextual and also intersubjective or relational enterprise, in which a determinative weight is accorded to criteria of inner coherence and consistency rather than to a notion of correspondence to a body of so-called 'objective facts'.

The notion of coherence which Van Huyssteen (1989:163-177) develops can be profitably applied in considering the rationality of the various documents which are under discussion. A model's claim to rationality is integrally linked to its ability to address the issues which confront a specific community as it reflects on its religious experience in dialogue with the Church, theological tradition and contemporary scientific reflection. Within the present discussion, the category of religious experience must be understood in a comprehensive manner so as to include the socio-political reality of which it is inevitably a part. The various models may therefore be assessed by their problem-solving ability, in other words by their capacity to present a contextually relevant and theoretically legitimate account of the important ideologies which they discern in Scripture.

The salient aspects of an ethics of interpretation may now be reviewed, by way of a number of criteria which may be applied in assessing the credibility of the models which are presented in the various position papers.

- * There should be an awareness that the interpretation of Scripture proceeds from an interested or ideological perspective, which inevitably reveals the influence of, amongst other factors, a specific socio-historical matrix. Such an appreciation has at least three implications:
 - ** Any model should abandon the absolutist and authoritarian claims which result from an unreflective appeal to a pure and unbiased hermeneutic;
 - ** A model which exposes the false consciousness which it detects in negative or destructive ideologies, but which refuses to recognise its own ideological commitment, is both misleading and dishonest (cf Deist 1983:37).
 - ** It should be accepted that the meaning which is derived from any scriptural passage is a variable phenomenon. This realisation does not imply that all attempts at 'objectivity' in exegesis are futile. Rather it confronts any model with the exigency of clarifying the methodological and ideological perspective from which its interpretive stance proceeds (cf Schüssler Fiorenza 1986: 380), in order to facilitate dialogue and intersubjective testing.¹⁰
- * The model should display a sensitivity to the diversity and therefore possibly quite conflicting ideologies which are contained in Scripture itself. This assertion again has a number of facets:
 - ** Consideration should be given to the criteria which determine the relative weight that should be attached to a certain scriptural theme or ideology. Are certain scriptural ideologies more pervasive than others?
 - ** The selective processes which lead to the use of certain scriptural ideologies in a given model should be made the object of conscious reflection. Here more is implied than the mere acknowledgement that Scripture is invariably used as part of a theological argument (cf Loader 1987:13-15). It is perhaps more important to realize that the diversity of Scripture contains an inherent corrective against the absolutisation of any of its ideological themes. Any contextual theology should therefore admit its prejudicial nature, and entertain an openness to less germane biblical accents which may better equip it to deal with the complexities of its own situation.
- * A model is accountable to the concrete situation in which it develops its interpretation of Scripture. The recognition that any society contains diverse interest groups, whose analyses of reality by no means coincide, only heightens this responsibility. At the very least, any model should clarify the specific interests

which guide it in its problem-solving appropriation of Scripture. At best, however, the practical processes of intersubjective testing should lead to a situation in which the relative merits of various models may be weighed with a view to resolving the broader problems that face that particular society as a whole.

In my opinion, the consideration of such criteria could increase the possibility of meaningful discussion and reflection amongst the diverse Christian groups whose perspectives are presented in the various statements. This prospect stands at the heart of the ensuing evaluative comments.

3. THE USE OF SCRIPTURE IN THE THREE DOCUMENTS

3.1 Church and Society

Church and Society (1990) (CS) presents by far the most extensive of the three documents, and is the only statement which provides the reader with a clear conception concerning its view of the role of the church in society. The document will be dealt with at some length because it represents the type of stance of right-wing Christianity against which both the *Road to Damascus* (1989) (RD) and the *Relevant Pentecostal Witness* (1989) (RPW) so vehemently inveigh.¹¹ In the ensuing discussion of matters pertaining to its use of Scripture, reference will be made to the revised (1990) version, which was unfortunately only available in Afrikaans. Where sections of the original and revised versions correspond, excerpts will be quoted in English on the basis of the translation of the 1986 document.

3.1.1 Explication and application, or the illusion of ideological neutrality

CS operates from a naive realistic framework, which approaches Scripture from a thoroughly a-historical standpoint (cf Van Huyssteen 1987). The document clearly assumes that it is possible to divorce the process of interpretation from the matrix of contextual influences in which the reader is situated. In seeking to extract abstract truths and norms from Scripture, it presents a classic example of what Vorster (1988:43) refers to as a hermeneutical, rather than a contextual, theology.

This problematic stance is already apparent in the division which the document draws between its theoretical and practical sections. Thereby it is implicitly assumed that the process of exegesis can be divided into two logically consequent steps of explication and application. The first step consists of an objective distillation of scriptural principles from the text, while the second step concerns itself with their application to a particular context. In the light of reception theory's insis-

tence on the dynamic and changing transactions between the reader and the text, the validity of such a procedure must be seriously questioned.

By virtue of its implicit exegetical methodology, CS is able to maintain the illusion of ideological neutrality, and can insist that in the formulation of principles from Scripture it is illegitimate to read one's own problems and circumstances into the text. Thereby, so we are informed, the Word of God would be reduced to the status of 'a contemporary recipe book with instant solutions to all human problems' (§ 15, 18).

Examples of this stance permeate the whole document. Thus statements such as those that are found in paragraphs 231, 275 and 304, as well as the whole section which deals with biblical norms for interpersonal and group relationships (§ 123-221), create the impression that clear and unfalsified principles are being identified which stand quite loose from the contextual commitment of the interpreter. Indeed, paragraph 26 categorically states that in contrast to the thought patterns of this old, passing world, the only criteria which may be applied to the evaluation of the church 'are those which are revealed to us under the guidance of God's Spirit'.

To the extent that CS warns against an uncontrolled hermeneutic improvisation, it utters a legitimate word of caution. Nevertheless, in the wake of reception theory, it can no longer be denied that it belongs to the very fabric of interpretation that contemporary problems are read into the text (Croatto 1987:66; Long 1990:349-350).

One of the clearest examples of CS's failure to clarify its own situational commitment is surely provided by its consistent refusal to identify the Dutch Reformed Church with any existing or other political ideologies (§§ 21, 274-275). As the document itself reveals, the rationale behind this concern for ideological neutrality seems to lie in the church's sincere embarrassment at its own scriptural endorsement of apartheid and racism (§ 282-287). Nevertheless, the belief that the church's responsibility is limited to the critical evaluation of all political models in the light of scriptural norms such as love, justice and human dignity, belies its own role as a social actor on the South African stage.

It could be contended that paragraph 276, in which the subjective nature of the evaluation of all political models is accepted, points beyond the document's idealistic hermeneutic. Unfortunately, this recognition of subjectivity has not been extended to include the specific interests that must inform any identification of scriptural norms. The point is that the manner in which any church derives principles from specific context-bound biblical passages, must inevitably reveal its own involvement in a concrete praxis. Furthermore, the manner in which the church or a Christian group envisages the practical implementation of such values forms part of its

ideological commitment, and therefore ipso facto reflects a predilection for a certain political ideology. In this regard, the following remark of Boff (1980:265-266) seems particularly apposite:

Theologians do not live in clouds. They are social actors with a particular place in society...The themes and emphases of a given Christology flow from what seems relevant to the theologian on the basis of his or her social standpoint...That holds true as well for theological discourse that claims to be 'purely' theological, historical, ecclesial and apolitical. Normally such discourse adopts the position of those who hold power in the existing system.

3.1.2 *Church and Society's ideological commitment to nationalism*

Despite its claim to neutrality in the interpretation of Scripture, CS operates from a definite ideological premise. This commitment is very clear in the 1986 document, which contains numerous references to the Dutch Reformed Church's intimate bond with the Afrikaner people, and which envisages the organization of society along nationalistic principles (cf Kinghorn 1989:125). Through rewording and the reformulation of various sections, the revised version creates the impression that it is trying to move away from a nationalistic concern.

To my mind, however, CS still allows the concept of national groups to operate as a determinative principle. Its influence is clear in both the selection and interpretation of material which should receive attention in the theoretical section, and also in the statements concerning the Dutch Reformed Church and various aspects of society in the practical section. Care is indeed taken to reject racism and an absolutization of one's own nation (§§ 110, 273) and it is also stressed that the Dutch Reformed Church is not a 'national church' (§§ 117, 271). Nevertheless, the document conveys the distinct impression that the reality of different national and cultural communities forms the principle according to which the practical contextualisation of the church is envisaged (cf §§ 116, 122, 254, 273, 281).

The manner in which certain prominent texts are discussed in the theoretical section, lends legitimation, albeit implicitly, to this viewpoint. Referring to Acts 2:1-11, the document remarks that the New Testament is realistic with respect to the practical problems which arise from the pastoral needs of different groups (§ 32). Although it is stated that such practical considerations should enrich the unity of the church, the clear impression is that Acts 2 provides scriptural warrant for the accommodation of the ministry of the gospel of different language and cultural groups.

Indeed, it may be asked whether the passage does not become part of a further argument which legitimates the organization of the church along nationalistic lines.

From my own committed perspective, Acts 2 presents a celebration of the unification of the church through the transcendence of linguistic and other barriers, rather than a warrant for its cultural and linguistic diversification (cf Hartin 1988: 23).

In similar vein, it may be asserted that CS's naive realism allows it to appeal to texts such as Genesis 10 and 11:1-10, Deuteronomy 32:8 and Acts 17:26 to sanction the view that within the one fundamental humanity (cf § 96-97), the organization of society along nationalistic principles accords with the will of God (cf § 104-109). How else can one explain the statement in paragraph 105, namely that 'the multitude of nations and their distribution over various territories are described as a historic reality which occurred by God's providential ordering?' Such considerations surely indicate that nationalistic anthropology remains the societal structuring principle which underlies the thought of CS (Kinghorn 1989:121-125).

3.1.3 Tensions between scriptural principles and practical implementation

Both the use of the explication-application dichotomy as its exegetical method, and the weight that is given to the concept of the nation, lead to various tensions in CS. Thus one finds that biblical pronouncements which refer to the regulation of interpersonal relationships are merely transposed onto the regulation of inter-group relationships (e.g. § 123). The potentially radical implications of some of CS's statements on matters such as justice, charity, neighbourly love, truth and dignity, which take up a considerable part of the document, lose their impact because of the social reality to which they have to conform.

The concept of justice may serve as an example. In the theoretical section justice is related to the structure of human society (§ 140), and it is stressed that doing justice to the poor or oppressed is no optional matter, but rather a case of restoring the right (צדקה) of those who have been deprived of their rights (§§ 148-149, 152). With reference to the Gospel of Luke, it is also stressed that God is par excellence the one who intercedes to take up the cause of the oppressed and suffering (§ 149-150).

One cannot help asking how CS can reconcile such and other similar statements on human dignity and charity with a de facto situation in which the nationalistic organisation of society is experienced as deeply hurtful by many fellow believers. It may also be asked how, in the discussion of the Dutch Reformed Church and the government, all forms of violence can be roundly condemned, while the problem of

structural violence is never addressed at all. How meaningful is it to appeal to the biblical doctrine of reconciliation to advocate orderly channels of communication between the government and the different national groups in South Africa, when the concrete experience of disenfranchisement and oppression has rendered such a concept redundant (cf Smit 1986:88-89)?

These remarks on CS will have to suffice. As is evident from the preceding discussion, CS's adherence to the 'explication – application' model seriously impairs its ability to meet the demands of an explanatory commitment. As a result of its exegetical methodology, it fails to address the internal complexity of Scripture, and it is arguably also insensitive to the complexity of the historical situation in which it is to be applied (cf Boff 1987:142-143).¹² Furthermore, by disclaiming the ideological and necessarily situational nature of its interpretation, it invests its own analysis of scriptural norms with an authority which raises them above the level of considered and reflective debate. Because CS does not consciously reflect on its own interests, it becomes virtually impossible to establish a basis for a reflective debate in which the explanatory merits of the document can be intersubjectively tested.

3.2 Road to Damascus and Relevant Pentecostal Witness

Both RD and RPW are protest documents, written from a concrete situation of oppression and disenfranchisement. Thus RD presents a penetrating critique of the effects of colonialism and Western imperialism upon the Third World, and identifies the rise of the modern security state as the framework within which the ideals of consumerist materialism are pursued at the expense of the poor and oppressed. Whilst far less extensive in its social analysis, RPW points to political oppression and economic exploitation as well as the justification of apartheid through the nationalistic theology of the Reformed church, as the context which the majority of exploited Christians in South Africa experience. Despite their common contextual points of departure, the two documents reveal differences in their hermeneutic pre-suppositions.

3.2.1 Road to Damascus

A positive aspect of RD is certainly its conscious reflection on its own ideological commitment, as is evident from its thesis that the class struggle presents the determinative factor which influences the use of Scripture. Insisting on the ideological determination of all interpretation, the document recognizes that Christianity is invoked by both sides of the socio-economic and political conflict (§§ 26, 27).

As can be expected the document devotes a great deal of attention to a ruthless exposure of right-wing Christianity, which is labelled under the various rubrics of idolatry, heresy, apostasy, hypocrisy and blasphemy (§ 44-82). The only legitimate expression of Christianity is one which identifies itself with the poor and the oppressed and proceeds to discover the true face of God in the Bible from this commitment. It may of course be asked whether RD's typification of right-wing Christianity is not too monolithic and grotesque to ring true. At least the document provides the reader with a very clear delineation of its perspectival position, and thereby prepares the ground for further debate.

As far as the use of Scripture is concerned, RD presents a cogent critique against the selection and distortion of certain parts of the Bible to legitimate the status quo. It points out that the Bible has been subjected to a spiritual and otherworldly interpretation, in order to paint a picture of a God who can speak no relevant word into a concrete situation of exploitation and suffering (§ 30-33). Furthermore, it argues that fundamentalism has been used to foster a spirit of blind obedience to a prevailing interpretation of Scripture which sanctions the aspirations of the ruling class (§ 66-67).

Unfortunately, RD contains far less evidence of its own assessment of the Bible than CS. From the limited available material, it is however apparent that the document is flawed by its failure to admit to the very practice it so roundly condemns in right-wing Christianity, namely the selective use of Scripture. The portrait which the document paints of God and Jesus is based on a mere handful of texts, notably from Exodus and Luke (cf §§ 36, 37, 40-41). The God that emerges from this eclectic use of texts fits RD's social analysis perfectly. Thus we are informed that 'the true God is the God of the poor who is angry about injustice in the world, vindicates the poor...pulls down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly' (§ 40). Similarly, it is asserted that 'We no longer believe in the God of the powerful and we want no gods except the God who was in Jesus' (§ 41).

The question that the document fails to address concerns the God to whom these statements appeal. The interpretative criteria that have been considered in this paper would suggest that RD has recourse to a God who emerges from the ideologically shaped textual world of specific biblical passages. RD should recognise that Scripture contains diverse ideologies, and that there is no single biblical view on a matter such as God and poverty (Vorster 1984:212).

Such conscious reflection would enable RD to admit that its interaction with the text is guided by the horizontal limitations of its rootedness in an oppressive situation. Consequently, it could assert that it is exercising a preferential option to appropriate models of God's activity which it perceives to be relevant within the spe-

cific crisis that confronts South African society. Furthermore, it could insist that the liberative trajectory with which it identifies enjoys a pervasive influence in Scripture. Such qualifications would not deny the potential significance of other biblical trajectories for further reflection on the needs of a changing society.

In sum, it is argued that RD only meets certain requirements of an explanatory commitment. Whilst it elucidates its own ideological bias, it is insensitive to the selectivity which must inevitably accompany any adjudication between diverse scriptural voices. As a result, the document creates the erroneous impression that it speaks with the full weight of the Bible behind it, and thereby frustrates the possibility of constructive intersubjective dialogue on the relative merits of its own interpretative choices.

3.2.2 *Relevant Pentecostal Witness*

Addressing itself to the specific situation as it exists in the Pentecostal church, RPW is as critical of status quo Christianity as RD is. It also declares its solidarity with those who suffer oppression as a result of the unjust socio-political and economic system which has been implemented by the ruling class in South Africa. As a result, the document condemns the distorted manner in which key aspects of Pentecostal belief have accommodated the prevalent ideology of apartheid, and thereby been effectively robbed of any contextual relevance.

For all its brevity, the potential significance of RPW is that it moves beyond the clarification of its own committed stance to give limited consideration to the ideological conditioning of Scripture. Thus the document insists that the divisive situation in South Africa legitimates the preaching of a differentiated message of repentance and salvation. Remarks concerning the tradition of John the Baptist and the Zacchaeus tradition indicate that Scripture contains a variety of traditions, or models of action, and it is at least implied that in a certain context it is legitimate to lend a greater weight to certain traditions. The document also points to the variable content of both John the Baptist and Jesus' message of repentance, and thereby indicates that in the Bible itself there is already an inseparable connection between 'doctrine' and context.

In my opinion, RPW is the only document which recognizes, however implicitly, that Scripture contains the deposit of various ideological expressions of faith. In the interests of an adequate explanatory commitment, this acknowledgement should be developed further into a more conscious reflection on the relative significance of certain traditions for the present context. Nevertheless, the greater flexibility of the document holds out the possibility that as societies undergo radical processes of

change, the Bible can remain a relevant partner in the continuing dialogue concerning the role of the church in society.

4. CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis has highlighted the urgency with which Christian groups from all sides of the debate should meet the needs of an adequate explanatory commitment. Indeed, the positions which are adopted by the various documents suggest that there is currently little basis for constructive and intersubjective engagement. With the possible exception of RPW, the partners in dialogue may too easily indulge in mutual accusations concerning the distortion of Scripture, without recognising the provisional nature of their own mediation between the Bible and the socio-political context. A more modest advocacy of their views could lay the groundwork for greater openness in the search for an appropriation of Scripture which would lead to an optimal resolution of societal problems.

The prospect for such an improved understanding is certainly no trifling matter. Given the key role which the churches should play in the development of new attitudes, their ability to move towards a greater consensus concerning a relevant model for Christian involvement in society holds out the hope of a meaningful peace in our conflict ridden country.

Endnotes

1. *Church and society* is of course a revision of the Dutch Reformed Church's 1974 policy document entitled *Ras, volk en nasie en volkereverhoudinge in die lig van die Skrif*. As for *Road to Damascus* and *Relevant Pentecostal Witness*, they follow in the wake of the Kairos document and other recent condemnations of the pre-valent injustices in South African society (cf Walker 1989:51-52).
2. Rowland and Corner (1990:67) define subjectivism as the process in which the text is denied to the extent that it is merely allowed to confirm the pre-established position of the interpreter. Essentialism, on the other hand, overvalues the text by pretending that its meaning can be established for all time quite independently of the interpreter.
3. Eagleton's criticisms are directed, inter alia, against Iser's tendency to reduce the polysemantic potential of the text by insisting on a consistent and stable meaning, and also against the objectivist illusion that the text can exercise a constraining function upon the reader. Against this latter point of critique, I find myself in agreement with Iser's insistence on the co-partnership between

- text and reader (cf also Jodock 1990:372; Morgan & Barton 1988:256-259). The matter has been vehemently debated by Iser (1981:82-87) and Fish (1981:2-13).
4. Interestingly, Jauss (1982:40) illustrates the common ground between reception aesthetics and sociological methods, by pointing to the role which the concept of the 'horizon of expectations' has also played in the social sciences since Mannheim.
 5. Geuss (1981:63-69) points to the difference in the Frankfurt school between Adorno who adopts a historicist or contextual approach to the construction of a critical theory, and Habermas who pursues a transcendental approach to the determination of real and rational interests. The difficulty in this aspect of Habermas's view is that he seems to accept the existence of universal norms which would be accepted by all agents, irrespective of their concrete historical conditions, in circumstances of perfect freedom and knowledge.
 6. The term 'total-general' emanates from Mannheim's distinction between the special and the general formulation of the total conception of ideology. In its special formulation, the total conception merely refers to the critique of the opponent's complete ideational structure. By contrast, the general sense implies the additional recognition of one's own ideological point of view (Mannheim 1936:57-62, 68-69).
 7. Bonino (1986:345) neatly pinpoints the dilemma when he remarks that 'the text of Scripture and tradition is forced into the Procrustean bed of ideology, and the theologian who has fallen prey to this procedure is forever condemned to listen only to the echo of his own ideology'.
 8. Barr (1973:161), Sanders (1984:37) and Goldingay (1987:129-133) all criticize the tendency to elevate a certain theme or aspect of the canon to such a status that it cannot be qualified in the light of other canonical perspectives.
 9. Van Huyssteen (1989:3-10) provides a lucid explanation of the approach of logical positivism.
 10. Deist (1983:38-40) makes a similar point when he argues that the decision to abandon an idealistic epistemology in favour of an ideology critical approach does not imply a lapse into a full-blown relativism. Rather, science becomes a radically argumentative enterprise in which the interpreter has to supply reasons for the meaning which he attaches to a historically conditioned text from his own historically conditioned situation.
 11. For discussions of the phenomenon of right-wing Christianity in South Africa and elsewhere, see the articles by Wannamaker (1989:17-27) and Gifford (1989: 28-39). The stance of the Dutch Reformed Church is not necessarily as un-

nanced as some of the movements and tendencies which are discussed in these papers.

12. Boff (1987:142-143) is addressing the problem of what he calls the 'gospel-politics' model, in which the gospel is merely seen as a code of norms which is to be applied to any context. This model is unable to appreciate both the differentiated relationship between various biblical significations, and the changing nature of various historical contexts.

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